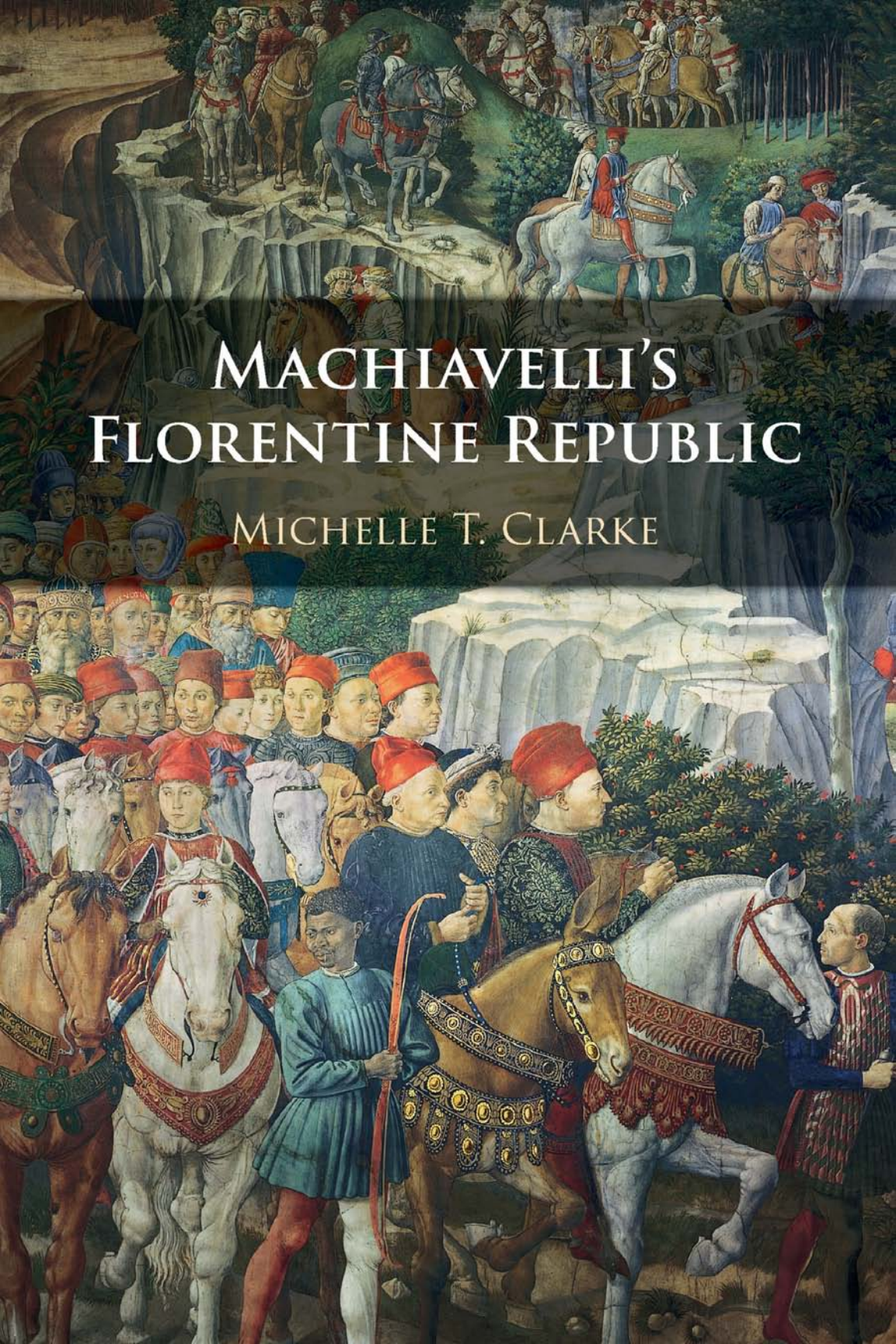




MACHIAVELLI'S FLORENTINE REPUBLIC

MICHELLE T. CLARKE

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Machiavelli's Florentine Republic

What do modern republics have to fear? *Machiavelli's Florentine Republics* reconstructs Machiavelli's answer to this question from the perspective of the *Florentine Histories*, his most probing meditation on the fate of republican politics in the modern age. It argues that his principle goal in narrating the defeat of Florentine republicanism is to debunk the views of leading humanists concerning the overall health of republican politics in modernity and the distinctive challenges that modern republics should expect to face. The Medici family had exposed these vulnerabilities better than anyone else, and Machiavelli reconstructs their political strategy to show how conventional ideas of moral and political virtue are the most potent instruments of princely ambition in a city that wants to be free.

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For C. and C.

Holy Father of thy Country, this title hath been conferred on thee by the people, by the senate, and by us, the knights. But history had already conferred it; yet didst thou also receive, though late, thy title true; long time hadst thou been Father of the World. Thou bearest on earth the name which Jupiter bears in high heaven: of men thou art the father, he of the gods. Romulus, thou must yield pride of place. Caesar by his guardian care makes great thy city walls: the walls thou gavest to the city were such as Remus could o'erleap. Thy power was felt by Tatius, the little Cures, and Caenina; under Caesar's leadership whate'er the sun beholds on either side is Roman. Thou didst own a little stretch of conquered land: all that exists beneath the canopy of Jove is Caesar's own. Thou didst rape wives: Caesar bade them under his rule be chaste. Thou didst admit the guilty to thy grove: he hath repelled the wrong. Thine was a rule of force: under Caesar it is the laws that reign. Thou didst the name of *dominus* bear: he bears the name of *princeps*.

– Ovid, *Fasti* 2, lines 134–144

When he had seduced the army with gifts, the people with grain, and everyone with the charms of peace, he grew stronger little by little. He collected the responsibilities of the Senate, the magistrates, and the courts for himself, with no one to stop him because the most energetic men had fallen in battle or proscriptions. As for the rest of the aristocrats, the more willingly they subjected themselves to slavery, the more they were rewarded with wealth and honors Everything was peaceful, and the magistrates had the same names as before. The younger citizens had been born after Augustus's victory at Actium, and the older ones were born during the civil wars. Who remained who had known the Republic?

– Tacitus, *The Annals*, 1.3–1.5

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Abbreviations

I have used the following abbreviations for Machiavelli's works. All quotations are drawn from these translations, unless otherwise noted.

- P *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998). References to *The Prince* are cited by chapter.
- D *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). References to the *Discourses* are cited by book and chapter.
- FH *Florentine Histories*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Laura Banfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). References to the *Histories* are cited by book and chapter.

Introduction

When the Uberti family went to war with the Florentine government in 1177, they were ready for a fight. Dotted across the neighborhood that would eventually become known as San Pier Scheraggio, lodged deep in the crowded and bustling city center, stood fortifications owned and operated by the Uberti and their allies. The interconnected houses of the Uberti themselves were clustered tightly between Via Magazzini and Via della Farine, near the Church of San Romolo and overlooking a spacious courtyard bearing their name, the *platea Ubertorum*. The narrow, twisting streets that laced their way around this extended family compound were easy to barricade and dense with Uberti partisans who could be relied on to assemble in their defense when called to arms. At the heart of this citadel stood a spectacular tower, more than 150 feet high and studded with balconies from which the Uberti could hurl rocks at enemy forces.¹

The Uberti themselves were an ancient and vaguely noble family, distantly related to the counts of Montespertoli, a small municipality in the *contado* southwest of Florence.² Like many of Florence's most prominent families, they were a knightly clan and thus heavily armed, extensively trained in the arts of war, and eager to participate in the courtly manners and rituals of the feudal north. In the congested urban environment of Florence, the concern for personal honor and family prestige that stood at the heart of this style of aristocratic identity furnished the Uberti with endless reasons to quarrel with their neighbors, and they did so with

¹ On the social and political geography of medieval Florence, see Najemy 2006a. For developments into the Renaissance, see Kent and Kent 1982.

² Jones 1997, 580.

relish. Swaggering, belligerent, and thin-skinned, these *grandi* or “big men,” as they were often called, were a constant source of civic disruption and unrest. Violent feuds among them were commonplace, and the city’s social and physical infrastructure – its fragmentation into distinct neighborhoods; the practice of joint property ownership, whereby rival kin groups transformed entire city blocks into sprawling family compounds; and especially the proliferation of defensive associations in which members pledged their loyalty and assistance to one other – made it all too easy for even minor disputes to blossom into savage and debilitating civil wars.³

While rivalry among *grandi* was always fierce, and it seemed that virtually anything could trigger their competitive energies, they pursued seats on the city consulate with special enthusiasm. Of little wonder, as the consulate was the highest political body in Florence and therefore a prized source of visibility and influence. Like any noble clan, the Uberti viewed with indignation the ascension of others to this office; but they were particularly incensed when they found themselves passed over in favor of their longstanding foes, the Giandonati, in 1177. With an arrogance typical of their class, they responded to this perceived slight by withdrawing to their family enclave and preparing for battle. Documenting the ensuing warfare, the Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani would later write that the Uberti “began war against the Consuls” because they were filled by “envy of the Government, which was not to their mind,” suggesting (not unreasonably) that the Uberti resented the very idea of government itself.⁴

Villani describes the violence that engulfed Florence for the next two years as a veritable “plague” in which “many died . . . and much peril and hurt was brought upon the city.”⁵ As families aligned themselves with one or another party, fighting quickly radiated from the immediate vicinity of the Uberti houses to all the city’s neighborhoods, with the consequence that “every day, or every other day, the citizens fought against one another in divers[e] parts of the city, from district to district, according as the factions were, and as they had fortified their towers,” which, Villani explains, were now being outfitted with “engines to shoot forth

³ On the social and political personae of Florentine magnates and the city’s efforts to control them, see Salvemini 1899; Ottikar 1927; Lansing 1991 and 2010; Klapisch-Zuber 2001 and 2006; Becker 2002; and Vigueur 2003. On Machiavelli’s usage of the term *grandi*, see Bonadeo 1969.

⁴ Villani 1907, 5.9. ⁵ Villani 1907, 5.9.

at one another.”⁶ Other popular chroniclers of the *trecento* would echo Villani’s lamentation of the intense bloodshed and destruction wrought by this conflict, including pseudo-Brunetto Latini, who stresses the “great mortality, robbery, and arson” precipitated by the Uberti, who “refused to obey . . . the Consuls” and “yet nevertheless formed no government of their own.”⁷ The Uberti themselves, however, were untouched by these losses, so consumed were they by family pride. And in the end, they got their way. In 1180, the Giandonati were forced to watch as Messer Uberto degli Uberti accepted the consulate, together with his ally Lamberto dei Lamberti.

The Florentine government would remain under the control of Uberti partisans almost continuously for the next seventy years. In 1250, however, the Uberti lost forever the supremacy they had fought so hard to attain. Following their triumph over the Giandonati, they had made little effort to quell widespread popular irritation at their overweening presumption, nor had they shown any interest in tamping down the violence that continued to erupt among other *grandi*. Instead, they had devoted themselves wholeheartedly to “tyranniz[ing] over the people with ruthless extortion and violence and outrage,” as Villani puts it, only confirming popular suspicions that “they of the house of the Uberti” were simply intolerant of civic peace and order.⁸ By the mid-*duecento*, the Florentine people had already begun to organize among themselves – into guilds, military societies, and confraternities, all dedicated to promoting the safety and well-being of their overlapping memberships – and Villani recounts how they now mobilized their collective power behind a new regime, the Primo Popolo. Fed up with Uberti abuses, Villani writes:

the good citizens of Florence, tumultuously gathering together, assembled themselves at the church of San Firenze; but not daring to remain there, because of the power of the Uberti . . . [they] went and took their stand at the church of the Minor Friars at Santa Croce, and remaining there under arms they dared not return to their homes, lest when they had laid down their arms they should be broken by the Uberti and the other nobles and condemned by the magistrates. So they went under arms to the houses of the Anchioni of San Lorenzo, which were very strong, and there, still under arms, they forcibly elected thirty-six corporals of the people, and took away the rule [of] the Podestà, which was then in Florence, and removed all the officials. And [when] this was done, with no further conflict they ordained and created a popular government with certain new ordinances and statutes.⁹

⁶ Villani 1907, 5.9.

⁷ Quoted in Villari 1901, 143.

⁸ Villani 1907, 5.39.

⁹ Villani 1907, 5.39.

These “new ordinances and statutes” were designed to limit the powers, formal and informal, that could be legitimately exercised by great families like the Uberti, who were now politically marginalized and militarily outmanned. Tower heights were strictly limited, *popolani* were banned from assembling outside the houses of nobility during periods of civic unrest, and the nobility were themselves prohibited from engaging in any further violence.

This was Florentine republicanism in its original and defining form. Its foremost task was minimizing the chaos and damage caused by the city’s most powerful houses, and over the next century it garnered widespread institutional, procedural, and statutory expression as such: in a dizzying array of public magistracies, distributed through sortition and filled almost exclusively by guildsmen; in the promulgation of the Ordinances of Justice, which identified the city’s most fractious lineages by name, forced them to pay substantial indemnities, and levied harsh penalties against their misbehavior; in the organization of twenty local militias for the purpose of defending common people against elite aggression; and so forth and so on.¹⁰

Still, as minimal as the goals of Florentine republicanism were during this period, they were not easily achieved. Under a series of popular regimes stretching into the fourteenth century, over 150 great families were publically declared “magnate” and subjected to a variety of restrictions, penalties, and humiliations designed to curb their lawless behavior. While some of these families were quickly pacified and absorbed into the ranks of the victorious *popolo*, many others refused to accept the terms under which they were now expected to live. These holdouts were destroyed – swiftly, mercilessly, and (as Machiavelli might have put it) “without respect.” The Uberti, unsurprisingly, fell into this second category. Forever at the center of communal agitation and instability, they were discovered plotting to overthrow the Florentine government in 1258. Summoned to appear before the city magistrates to answer for charges of treason, the Uberti chose instead to launch a vicious attack on the household of the city’s *podestà*.

Enraged by this affront to public authority, the Florentine *popolo* marched en masse to the Uberti houses and killed several family leaders. Other members of the Uberti clan were later tortured and executed, and

¹⁰ Major treatments of the political and institutional history of Florentine republicanism include Becker 1960 and 1967; Brucker 1977 and 1999; Najemy 1979, 1982a, 1991, and 2006b; Fubini 1991; Stern 1995; Jones 1997; and Zorzi 1988.

its remaining members were permanently exiled from the city together with their Ghibelline allies, including the Fifanti, Guidi, Amidei, Lamberti, Scolari, Abati, Caponsacchi, Migliorelli, Soldanieri, Infangati, Ubriachi, Tedaldini, Galigari, della Pressa, Amieri, Cersino, and Razzani. Moreover, Uberti properties were confiscated by the city and razed to the ground, including the great family tower of which they had once been so proud. On the site where these buildings had formerly stood, a new public square was built: the aptly named Piazza del Popolo. The very rubble of the demolished Uberti palaces went toward the construction of the Palazzo della Signoria, an imposing fortress-like structure in which it was hoped that Florentine magistrates could now safely live and work. Even today, one can still find displayed on the Palazzo's walls the Uberti coat of arms bearing the inscription *Oh quali io vidi quei che son disfatti per lor superbia!* (Oh how many I saw who were destroyed by pride!).

1.1 Machiavelli's *Histories* and the Rise and Fall of Florentine Republicanism

This book explores some of the ways in which Machiavelli's political thought can be said to bear the impression of this crucial phase of Florentine political experience. It is well-known, of course, that Machiavelli frequently invokes Florentine history in both *The Prince* (1513) and the *Discourses on Livy* (1518), typically in the form of negative examples. In this book, I use Machiavelli's extended analysis of Florentine politics in the *Florentine Histories* (1525) to illuminate these references and to argue that Machiavelli's republicanism is best understood as a critical response to the successes and failures of his own city's republican project. As I will show, Machiavelli knew only too well how difficult it was to sort the one from the other, not least because the historical record itself had since become subject to intense partisan manipulation. The *Histories* represents Machiavelli's most concentrated effort to take the proper measure of his city's republican aspirations and achievements, a task that he believes humanist historiographers before him had left unfulfilled to the detriment of all modern republicans, for whom knowledge about the Florentine case was, in Machiavelli's estimation, of vital importance.¹¹

¹¹ Unfortunately, the *Histories* has occupied a largely peripheral position in the English-language scholarship on Machiavelli's political thought, including his republicanism. Most book-length studies of the *Histories* have been produced by Italian scholars (Garosci 1973; Anselmi 1979; Cabrini 1985 and 1990b; Sasso 1993) although this has

At its simplest, my claim is that Machiavelli admired the emergent popular republicanism of late medieval Florence for its suspicious and defensive political sensibilities, even as he lamented its ultimate failure to secure the city's liberty against the relentless ambitions of its own *grandi* – most notably the Medici, who at last converted Florence into a principality in 1434. Consistent with documentary evidence, Machiavelli presents early Florentine republicanism as having originated first and foremost as a popular reaction to the rivalrous and combative behavior of local elites. Its defining laws and institutions were intended to mitigate the vulnerability of common people to the pervasive, unpredictable, and often brutal violence to which they were otherwise subject – forms of abuse that he refers to (euphemistically, following his sources) as “oppression,” “injury,” and “offense.” Thus Florentine republicanism was originally a matter of popular security, he argues, assured through the construction and exercise of state power and the policing of socially disruptive attitudes and actions on the part of *grandi*.¹²

In reflecting on this early phase of Florence's republican political history, Machiavelli found much worth admiring, as his regular appropriation of its core language, concepts, and values attests. His conviction that all political communities are divided between *popolo* and *grandi* (P 9; D 1.4; FH 2.12); his sense of their distinctive *umori*, which define *grandi* as those who want to oppress and the *popolo* as those who want not to be oppressed; his association of republican liberty with “being able to enjoy one's things freely, without any suspicion, not fearing for the honor of wives and that of children, not to be afraid for oneself” (D 1.16) – all of this reflects the depth of Machiavelli's theoretical investment in his own city's republican political heritage. But however much he may have admired its insight, spirit, and resolve, Machiavelli never allowed himself

started to change (Jurdjevic 2014). For briefer but still important studies of Machiavelli's political thought in light of the *Histories*, see Gaeta 1973; Marietti 1974; Gilbert 1977c; Najemy 1978 and 1982b; Phillips 1979 and 1984; Dionisotti 1980; Bock 1990; Di Maria 1992; Kukofka 1992; Martelli 1992 and 1996; Mansfield 1998c; Quint 2003; Cabrini 2010; Lynch 2012; and Winter 2012. On the *Histories* as an example of Renaissance historiography, see Bondanella 1974.

¹² Most treatments of Machiavelli's relationship with “Florentine republicanism” have focused on his stance with regard to key ideas and arguments put forward by Renaissance humanists (e.g., Baron (1955) 1966; Pocock 1975; Gilbert 1977b; Skinner 1978 and 1990; Viroli 1990 and 1998; Mansfield 2000; Nelson 2006) or older representatives of the city's intellectual tradition (Skinner 1990). Fewer have situated Machiavelli's work in relation to Florentine political history itself, although there are several noteworthy exceptions to this generalization (Gilbert 1965; Najemy 1978 and 1982b; Rubinstein 1990; Silvano 1990; Jurdjevic 2008; Ardito 2015).

the illusion that Florentine republicanism had ended in success. At the crux of the *Histories* is Machiavelli's tough-minded observation that, even after a century of aggressive popular reforms, Florence had succumbed nevertheless to what was, in all but name, a form of princely rule with Cosimo Medici's return from exile in 1434. This climactic event stands at the very center of the *Histories*, both literally and figuratively, and making sense of it against the backdrop of the civil conflicts out of which Florentine republicanism was born is a key objective of the work.

This book makes the argument that Machiavelli's *Histories* traces the failure of Florentine republicanism to its overemphasis on civic peace. As Machiavelli recognizes, the anti-elitism at the heart of early Florentine republicanism was certainly intense, but it was never absolute: its targets were always cruder displays of political ambition that disturbed, or threatened to disturb, the safety and tranquility of the wider community. Accordingly, while the Florentine *popolo* were uncompromising in their efforts to disarm the city's "thuggish" *grandi* (the Uberti, for example), they were also tolerant of softer, more sociable forms of elite power. In the *Histories*, Machiavelli tracks the process whereby Florentine elites learned to exploit this moderation, reinventing themselves as morally upright, public spirited, and popularly disposed community leaders in order to evade the popular scrutiny and resistance that had so consistently thwarted the princely designs of earlier *grandi*.¹³

Thus, according to Machiavelli, Florentine republicanism did not secure the city against princely rule: it merely effected a change in princely style. As early as the Ciompi Rebellion, Machiavelli shows, Florentine elites were beginning to redeem their power in the currency of honorable, pro-social qualities and intentions. By the mid-*quattrocento*, this style was on spectacular display in the form of Medici rule – and yet unrecognizable for what it was. In the *Histories*, Machiavelli sets out to expose and repair this deficiency of Florentine republicanism, which had since become a principal component of humanist reconstructions of the city's republican history, through a careful analysis of the rhetorical strategies whereby the Medici had successfully eluded republican scrutiny.¹⁴ It is this lesson more than any other that Machiavelli wishes to teach the "liberal spirits" to whom he re-dedicates the *Histories* in Book 5, in the hope that

¹³ Scholars arguing that Machiavelli's political thought became more conservative over time (e.g., Martelli 1996; Bausi 2005; Ascoli 2013; Black 2013; Jurdjevic 2014) have largely overlooked these features of the *Histories*, which testify to an abiding skepticism toward social and political elites.

¹⁴ On the rise of the Medici, see Hale 1977 and especially Kent 1978.

they will more successfully “avoid and eliminate” the “deceits,” “guile,” and “arts” whereby princes like the Medici had finally triumphed over republican orders (FH 5.1).

1.2 What Was “Florentine Republicanism” Really?

Formally commissioned by Pope Leo X in 1520, the *Histories* was the first major assignment given to Machiavelli by the Medici following his arrest, imprisonment, and torture – on their orders – in 1513. Machiavelli’s standing with the Medici had begun to improve in 1519 when, together with several other Florentines, he was invited by Cardinal Giulio de Medici to propose a schedule of republican constitutional reforms, apparently in an effort to placate the family’s republican opponents in a moment of vulnerability following Lorenzo the Younger’s death earlier that year. While Machiavelli’s advice to the Medici in the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* was ignored, just as *The Prince* had been some years earlier, Giulio invited him soon afterward to write a new history of Florence. Machiavelli accepted this offer and presented Giulio (now Pope Clement VII) with the *Histories* in 1525.

If the *Histories* offers recommendations for how Florence might finally realize its long-held republican ambitions, perhaps akin to the advice that Machiavelli had just provided the Medici in the *Discourse*, it does so only implicitly. Explicitly at least, the *Histories* focuses on the past, and especially Florence’s many political weaknesses, mistakes, and failures. While it contains moments of success, they are fleeting and quickly followed by more lasting failures. With regard to the Primo Popolo, for example, Machiavelli relates how the “military and civil orders” upon which Florentines “founded their freedom” in 1250 made their city “head of Tuscany” and “among the first cities of Italy” (FH 2.6) but were inadequate to the task of limiting elite power at home, which survived these measures in new and more elusive forms. For these reasons, the *Histories* is typically and appropriately characterized as a melancholy reflection on the lost promise of Florentine republicanism, one that anticipates and illuminates the dysfunctions associated with its more recent iterations.¹⁵

Against a seemingly imperturbable historiographic tradition, led by *quattrocento* humanists like Leonardo Bruni, in which Florentine republicanism was presented as a *fait accompli*, equal in splendor to Rome itself, the *Histories* advances a far less congratulatory view of Florence, a city

¹⁵ See especially Gilbert 1977c.

that continues even today to be remembered as a model of republican government. Consistent with his stinging verdict in *Discourses* 1.49 that Florence had never in “two hundred years of true memory . . . *ever* had a state for which it could truly be called a republic,” Machiavelli relays in the *Histories* the story of a city vacillating unsteadily between anarchy and princely rule without ever securing the free way of life that stood, at least nominally, as its defining objective.¹⁶

It was true, of course, that Florence’s constitution was formally republican throughout this period, and it would continue to be so until Alessandro Medici assumed the title of duke in 1532. It was also true that within little more than a century, even Florence’s most recalcitrant magnates had been tamed and the city itself had been “reduced . . . to a wonderful equality” (FH 3.1). For “the generality of men” who “feed on what appears [to be] as much as on what is” and “many times . . . are moved more by things that appear than by things that are” (D 1.25), these achievements were enough to prove that Florence was a genuinely free state.¹⁷ But Machiavelli himself, ever attentive to the “effectual truth” of private power and personal dependence lurking behind Florence’s republican façades, rejects this conclusion – and with it the commonplace, still popular today, that Florence was a republican holdout in an “age of princes.”¹⁸ According to Machiavelli, Florence’s republican regime had amounted to little more than a fantasy, as imaginary as anything found in the books of Plato or Augustine, and the *Histories* exposes this ugly truth for all to see.¹⁹

In uncovering this truth of Florentine political history, Machiavelli takes himself to be fulfilling the first and most important responsibility of a historian: saying something *useful*. While the princely character of Medici rule had long since been exposed as such when Machiavelli wrote the *Histories*, no one had yet provided an account of Florentine

¹⁶ Emphasis added.

¹⁷ It should be noted that Machiavelli makes this observation about the “generality of men” in the context of discussing how important it is to conceal political innovations under “the shadow of . . . ancient modes” (D 1.25) – an apt description of the Medici strategy.

¹⁸ Skinner 2001a, 119, 126–127. As I discuss in Chapter 2, Skinner inherits this naïve description of *quattrocento* Florence from Baron (1955) 1966. On the reality of Medici power, see Rubinstein 1997, Hale 1977, Martines 2003, Najemy 2006a, Brown 1992, Kent 1975 and 1978, and Molho 1979. On the ideological significance of humanism to the Florentine oligarchies of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see Martines 1979, Najemy 1982b and 2000, Brucker 1979–1980, Jurdjevic 1999.

¹⁹ Machiavelli famously describes himself as someone attentive to the “effectual truth of things,” as opposed to “imagined republics and principalities,” in chapter 15 of *The Prince*.

republican history that could be used to substantiate this conclusion – or, even more troublingly, to inform future judgments about such figures and the authenticity of their republican credentials. Indeed, Machiavelli’s most famous predecessor, Bruni, had produced a history of Florence that seemed designed to leave readers profoundly handicapped in this regard, unable to critique Medici power as a betrayal of Florence’s long-held republican principles. As I show in [Chapter 2](#), Bruni’s monumental *History of the Florentine People* (1415–1444) effectively gave Medici power the blessing of historical accreditation by re-describing Florentine republicanism as an effort to secure rule by a certain kind of elite, “the best” – all while enjoying, it must be noted, the generous sponsorship of those who had, or could plausibly be said to have, these distinctive qualities.

In support of this claim about the essentially elitist character of Florentine republicanism, Bruni and others had mobilized what they purported to be an accurate portrayal of the city’s history, which was supposed to demonstrate that the slow accumulation of power in the hands of certain prominent Florentines was consistent with, and even necessary for, the full realization of Florence’s long-held republican aims. Machiavelli, however, rejects Bruni’s retelling of Florentine history as a misrepresentation of the facts. Notable for its inventiveness and ideological heft, the humanist thesis was wrong all the same, Machiavelli argues – not because it engaged in a wholesale fabrication of “facts,” but because it misused those “facts” in such a way as to make the raw material of history tell a lie.

As a consequence, Machiavelli believed his first order of business in the *Histories* to be clarifying what Florentine republicanism actually *was*. Before he could render any final judgment about Florentine republicanism, positive or negative, he had to redefine it for an audience that had been led astray by earlier writers. [Chapter 2](#) reconstructs Machiavelli’s efforts along these lines. There I argue that, against a historiographic tradition that had twisted the history of Florentine republicanism out of recognizable shape in service to a political theory that was “republican” only in name, Machiavelli’s *Histories* reorganizes the canonical memory of Florentine republicanism around a more faithful rendering of its defining ambitions and achievements.

One of Machiavelli’s goals in formulating this corrected account of Florentine republicanism is to provide his readers with a more accurate sense of both the essential conditions of political life *everywhere* and the distinctive features of an authentically “republican” response to them, both of which he believed Florentine history had revealed. According to Machiavelli, a century of humanist historiography had worked to

obliterate these theoretical insights, so critical to the success of future republican projects, in an effort to bolster the legitimacy of Medici power, which, for all its rhetorical maneuvering, could not be fully reconciled with the city’s traditional republican political identity. Machiavelli’s *Histories* thus reintroduces Florence to itself, setting before his readers an alternative to the tendentious and self-congratulatory historiography of the city first aired under the approving, if allegedly disinterested, gaze of Medici power in the early *quattrocento*, in the hope of providing his readers with a true education in republican citizenship.

In the *Histories*, Machiavelli targets the two most venerable contributions to the humanist historiographical tradition, Bruni’s *History of the Florentine People* and Poggio Bracciolini’s acclaimed *Florentine History* (1476).²⁰ While he refuses to be mired in debates as to whether they were bad historians or outright propagandists, Machiavelli openly charges both of these writers with having failed to provide a satisfactory account of Florentine political history prior to 1434 – one that would have allowed Machiavelli to commence his own history with the events of that year, as he claims he had originally intended to do. None of Machiavelli’s contemporaries would have needed his reminder that 1434 marked the beginning of the Medici regime, nor would it have been difficult to infer that Machiavelli’s dissatisfaction with his predecessors concerned their failure to properly illuminate this phenomenon.

Chapter 2 focuses specifically on Machiavelli’s effort to undo the damage caused by Bruni’s narration of early Florentine history, in which the city’s germinal republican aspirations were recast as a subtle but corrosive authorization of elite power as it was exercised during Bruni’s own lifetime.²¹ As I show, Bruni’s *History* had characterized Florentine republicanism as the enactment of moral and political virtues inherited from Rome, several of which (it was said) belonged only to a subset of the Florentine population – the city’s “true nobility” – to whom, it followed, political power ought to be entrusted as a matter of civic duty. Machiavelli, however, depicts early Florentine republicanism as a far more

²⁰ On the place of Bruni and Poggio within the broader tradition of humanist historiography, as well as insightful treatments of its central themes and innovations, see Wilcox 1969; Struever 1970; Fryde 1983; Black 1987; Ianziti 1988, 2007, and 2012; Cabrini 1990a; Kelley 1998; Hankins 2000, 2008, and “Mirror for Statesmen”; Fubini 2003; Grafton 2007; and Connell 2011 and 2012.

²¹ On the political import of Bruni’s *History*, see Baron (1955) 1966; Ullman 1955; Wilcox 1969; Struever 1970; Cochrane 1981; Cutinelli-Rèndina et al. 2005; Ianziti 2007 and 2012; Hankins “Mirror for Statesmen”; Fubini 2003.

thoroughly anti-elite political program, one that aimed “to keep the powerful in check” (FH 2.11) through a panoply of laws and institutions designed to curb their most destructive impulses and enforced by the people – the larger, peaceable class of every city, and the more vulnerable. Foregrounding events which he believed Bruni had underplayed or underappreciated while also elaborating on a historical context that at last makes sense of the motivations behind well-rehearsed storylines in the civic canon, Machiavelli reconstitutes the raw stuff of Florentine republicanism, following the lead of pre-humanist chroniclers in re-describing it as a form of popular opposition to local forms of elite power. In doing so, Machiavelli enables his readers to see the Medici regime not as the fulfillment of republican aspirations, as Bruni had suggested, but rather as a confirmation of their betrayal and defeat.

In the *Histories*, then, Machiavelli challenges the normalizing function that humanist historiography had played in relation to Medici political practice by recovering the intense skepticism toward elite power that had once animated Florentine republicanism. *Popolo* against *grandi*, people against “big men” – Machiavelli regards this struggle and no other as definitional to republican identity and achievement. In addition to reviving and fortifying the very language of republicanism, which had become (as Quentin Skinner might say) “stretched and confused” by the ideological manipulation that Machiavelli finds afoot in Bruni’s history, the *Histories* also re-energizes the spirit of republicanism, which Machiavelli recognizes as being no less essential to republican political projects than knowledge and canny.²² For Machiavelli, a republican posture lies in a sense of oneself as free, a belief in the necessity and rewards of political work, a feeling of pride and dignity in political struggle, and a contempt for the sometimes seductive strategies of oppression. These sensibilities and principles had been undercut by humanist historiography, which had retold Florentine history in such a way as to insinuate the appeal of princely rule, the fundamental incapacity of the people, and the urgency of entrusting power to those few allegedly fit to exercise it. Machiavelli expects his account of Florentine republicanism to counter these effects, too. By reinstating the centrality of “civil discords and internal enmities” in understanding what Florentine republicanism actually was, Machiavelli also believes he is offering an appropriately “moving” example of it (FH pref.).

²² Skinner 2001c.

The popular cast of Machiavelli’s republicanism has been the subject of much recent scholarship.²³ However, its failure to incorporate a careful reading of the *Histories* has resulted in some misunderstandings of Machiavelli’s thought that I hope to correct in this book. One point of confusion has to do with Machiavelli’s relationship with the republican political tradition. According to John McCormick, for example, Machiavelli’s staunch anti-elitism should be taken as evidence that he was not actually a republican at all, but instead a democrat who pitted himself “against republicanism” and its oligarchic biases.²⁴ But this argument hangs on a mischaracterization of republicanism that Machiavelli himself worked tirelessly to dispel, namely that republicanism is an essentially oligarchic political tradition.²⁵ Although it is true that humanists like Bruni and Poggio had authorized the concentration of power in the hands of a narrow elite in the name of ‘republican liberty’ through their own retellings of Florentine history, republicanism only acquired this oligarchic valence after having served for more than a hundred years as a potent weapon of

²³ Most notably McCormick 2010, but see also McCormick 2003 and 2009; Vatter 2000; Winter 2012.

²⁴ McCormick 2003. Indeed, McCormick holds that republicanism must be “reconstructed beyond all recognition” to serve as a resource for counteracting elite power, with the implication being that Machiavelli is not just an “outlier” in the republican political tradition but its “most incisive critic and steadfast adversary” (2010, 8–9).

²⁵ According to McCormick, republicanism has always possessed a “predominantly oligarchic” complexion because, in both “ancient and modern political theory and practice,” it “guarantees the privileged position of elites more than it facilitates political participation” (2003, 615). This allegation concerning “the traditional oligarchic tendencies of republicanism” informs McCormick’s critique of the Cambridge School, in which he maintains that scholars like Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli have concealed this “fact” about republicanism in an effort to make Machiavelli appear to be more of a republican than he really is (615). My own impression of how the Cambridge School has characterized the history of republicanism is quite different, however, and consequently I see relatively little distance between McCormick and the Cambridge School on this subject. As I show in Chapter 2, the Cambridge School has routinely privileged humanist sources (especially Bruni) in reconstructing Florentine republicanism, uncritically accepting the elitist concepts and arguments found in these sources as characteristic of Florentine republicanism generally. So, whereas McCormick limits his criticism of the Cambridge School to their unwillingness to write explicitly about republicanism’s elitist tendencies, I see the problem as a deeper one having to do with the Cambridge School’s overrepresentation of these elitist tendencies – a problem that haunts McCormick’s work too. On the populist character of early Florentine republicanism, see especially Najemy 1982a. For recent efforts to dislodge stereotypes about Roman republicanism that minimize the power and authority it accords the Roman people, see Lintott 1987; Millar 1998; Mouritsen 2001; Morstein-Marx 2004; Wiseman 2009; and Arena 2012. Balot and Trochimchuk (2012) offer a different reply to McCormick’s thesis, one premised on an elitist reading of Machiavelli.

the Florentine people, who, in Machiavelli's own words, used republican orders to "act . . . against the insolence of the great" (FH 2.23). Far from being the beneficiaries of republican orders, Machiavelli relates, the Florentine nobility were "crushed without any respect" by them and reduced to a state of total "ruin" within just a few decades (FH 2.11). Look to history, Machiavelli tells us, and republicanism shows itself to be decidedly and definitionally hostile to elites.

McCormick's mischaracterization of republicanism is understandable, however, given the currency of Bruni's work among leading intellectual historians. As I discuss in the closing of [Chapter 2](#), Machiavelli's correction to humanist historiography in the *Histories* and its implications for how we understand the history of republican ideas has gone all but unnoticed by contextualists like Quentin Skinner – the very scholars most invested in studying political ideas in relation to the historical contexts in which they were formed and expressed and, even more ironically, most adamant that we appreciate the ideological dimension of all political theorizing. Here, I show how Skinner uncritically relays Bruni's own version of republican intellectual history without appreciating how it might itself stand as an "ideological maneuver" (and an anti-republican one at that). Machiavelli, however, approaches Bruni's narrative more skeptically, because, even as he shares the broadly contextualist view that political history can be an invaluable source of interpretive insight – knowing something about what political ideas were once used to *do* helps clarify what they actually *meant* to those who used them – he also recognizes that others have known this too, and produced histories slanted in favor of their preferred theoretical, and ultimately political, agendas. By recovering Machiavelli's effort to challenge and displace Bruni's misrepresentation of the political context in which Florentine republicanism originated, I also hope to repair some of the damage it has caused to our own thinking about the history of republican ideas.

1.3 Florence and the Legacy of Roman Imperialism

Machiavelli memorializes Florentine republicanism in the *Histories* so as to honor and encourage its core principles. These principles, admirable in their own right, were made all the more impressive to Machiavelli by the historical backdrop against which they were forged, which he believed was profoundly disabling with respect to liberty. As I show in [Chapter 3](#), the *Discourses* and the *Histories* develop crucial and related historical claims about the sources of political corruption in the modern age. In

the *Discourses*, I argue, Machiavelli surveys Rome's extraordinary martial prowess not merely to illustrate how empires are successfully created and maintained, as others have observed, but also to explain why, a full millennium after the Empire's collapse, cities like Florence "still have not been able to put themselves back together or order themselves for civil life" (D 2.2). Here, Machiavelli demonstrates that to have been part of the Roman Empire was to have been reconstituted – utterly and profoundly – as a compliant subject of Roman *dominium*. The *Histories* takes this argument further by depicting the aftermath of Roman imperialism from the perspective of its former subjects, not one of whom, Machiavelli points out, has successfully overcome the state of disunity and disorder that followed the decomposition of Roman hegemony.²⁶

By tracing the political enfeeblement of the West to the martial virtues of the Roman Republic, Machiavelli submits a more ambivalent view of Rome than is typically believed.²⁷ As everyone knows, the *Discourses* is replete with praise for Rome, including the ruthless efficiency of its imperial policies, which Machiavelli lauds for having contributed to the glory and greatness of the Roman people. Indeed, it is partly on the basis of Rome's extraordinary military accomplishments that Machiavelli recommends it as an exemplar for modern republics like Florence to follow. And yet his explanation for the deficiencies of modern republics points back to Rome too, and to precisely the same qualities that Machiavelli recommends for emulation. Put simply, according to Machiavelli, Rome created the very political problems that it now had to solve, bequeathing to modernity a twinned and paradoxical legacy in which it stands as both a blessing and curse to its heirs.

As I discuss in [Chapter 3](#), Bruni had misrepresented this aspect of Florentine history too. While professing to have scoured classical sources for information concerning Florence's ancient origins, he had ignored ample evidence in the works of Livy and Cicero that the city's foundation had been compromised by the exercise of Roman power. Making no mention

²⁶ Consequently, as I argue at greater length in [Chapter 3](#), Machiavelli does not believe that Christianity, either institutionally or ideologically, is fundamentally to blame for the weakness of the modern world, or even just the failure of its republican projects (cf. Sullivan 1996). Rather, Machiavelli believes the principal disease of modernity to be a social and political habitus in which the weak submit themselves to the strong in exchange for the help that might otherwise come from collective action. Machiavelli suggests this disease is a residue of Roman imperial rule, with papal authority being just one of its many symptoms. For more on Machiavelli's attention to the brutality and deceitfulness of Roman imperialism, see Hulliung 1984; Clarke 2008; Fischer 2010.

²⁷ Machiavelli's ambivalence toward Rome is also the subject of [Chapter 5](#).

at all of Rome's brutal extermination of the free peoples that had once filled Italy or the adverse circumstances under which Florence itself had been settled, Bruni had instead portrayed Rome as an unambiguously positive force in Florentine history and Florence itself as heir to Roman liberty and greatness. According to Bruni, the relationship between ancient Rome and modern Florence was an essentially lineal one, through which Roman virtues had passed, latent but undisturbed, into modernity, with the happy consequence that Florence was all but destined to replicate and even surpass Roman political achievements.²⁸

Machiavelli rejects these claims outright, as not only historically unsupported but also unfairly dismissive of the creativity and innovation shown by the Florentine people in the republican struggles of generations past. Whereas Bruni would have us believe that Florentine republicanism was merely a fated reenactment of Roman history, fit to be celebrated but never doubted, Machiavelli shows that, in attempting to live freely, Florentines were in fact doing something they had never done before or been prepared by others to undertake. Having never been free themselves, they were launching a political project about which they had no direct knowledge or experience. Moreover, Machiavelli adds, history could offer them precious little guidance, as there were few examples of republics in the modern world to which Florentines could appeal for help. But even as he acknowledges these challenges facing modern republicans, Machiavelli works to surmount them. In recounting the history of Florentine republicanism, however uneven it proved to be, he offers Florence the most authentic exemplum of a free republic available to it – itself. Machiavelli's *Histories* thus reorients Florentine sights around this revived image, as opposed to the reduced and compromised portrait developed by humanists, all while understanding the overawing nature of Rome's legacy in the West and the consequent unlikelihood of its fulfillment.

1.4 Princely Ambition and the Ambiguity of Medici Virtue

Machiavelli's preoccupation with the fate of Florentine republicanism in the *Histories* makes it an obvious point of comparison with his more famous *Discourses on Livy*, which examines the republicanism of ancient

²⁸ The notion that Florence was descended from Rome was a common theme in the broader humanist literature. On the famous debate between Antonio Loschi and Coluccio Salutati concerning whether or not Florence was founded by Romans, for example, see Witt 1983; Bondanella 1987; and Rubinstein 2004. Hörnqvist 2004 discusses how this idea was recruited in support of Florence's imperial ambitions.

Rome. Completed just a year or two before Machiavelli received his commission to write the *Histories*, the *Discourses* considers how various Roman “modes and orders” supported the development of a free way of life there, together with how the city’s republicanism interacted with other features of its political identity, especially its tremendous imperial ambitions. Whereas he characterizes the educative value of the *Histories* primarily in terms of its negative lessons, Machiavelli claims to have written the *Discourses* so that modern readers would imitate the examples of “ancient virtue” contained therein (D 1.pref.), suggesting the two books illuminate different aspects of a single republican political theory. This impression is further strengthened by numerous other intertextual linkages. For example, the *Discourses* and the *Histories* make use of a similar conceptual vocabulary in describing the essential forces at work in political life: in addition to a shared lexicon of general terms like virtue (*virtù*), fortune (*fortuna*), necessity (*necessità*) and corruption (*corruzione*), they contain a wealth of common language associated with the distinctive humors (*umori*) of the *popolo* and *grandi*, including ambition (*ambizione*), envy (*invidia*), indignation (*sdegno*, *indegnazione*), pride (*superbia*), greed (*avarizia*, *cupidita*), arrogance (*arroganza*), fear (*paura*), hate (*odio*), love (*amore*), gratitude (*gratia*), suspicion (*suspizione*), contempt (*disprezzo*), respect (*rispetto*), satisfaction (*soddisfazione*), and so on. The *Discourses* makes ample reference to Florentine history and offers several lengthy analyses of Florentine politics (1.1, 1.2, 1.7, 1.8, 1.11, 1.33, 1.38, 1.39, 1.45, 1.47, 1.49, 1.52–1.56, 1.59, 2.9–2.12, 2.15, 2.16, 2.19, 2.21–2.25, 2.27, 2.30, 2.33, 3.1, 3.3, 3.6, 3.9, 3.12, 3.15, 3.16, 3.18, 3.27, 3.43, 3.48). At times, the *Histories* even refers explicitly to arguments developed at greater length in the *Discourses*, such as when Machiavelli explains his decision not to “reason on the qualities of conspiracies and their importance” in discussing the Pazzi conspiracy (FH 8.1) by pointing out that he has already “spoken of it in another place,” namely *Discourses* 3.6. Indeed, the *Histories* occasionally lifts entire passages from the *Discourses*: for example, Machiavelli’s condemnation of partisanship in *Discourses* 3.28 reappears almost verbatim in *Histories* 7.1.

Given these continuities, one would expect the *Histories* to figure prominently in ongoing debates about Machiavelli’s political thought and his place within the wider republican political tradition. And yet, until very recently, the *Histories* has remained outside the customary ambit of scholarly work on Machiavelli, with the result that our thinking about Machiavelli’s republicanism has been shaped almost exclusively by how

the *Discourses* has been read and interpreted.²⁹ One can imagine at least three reasons for this reluctance to pry too deeply into its pages. First, as early readers like de Tocqueville noted, the *Histories* is a demanding book, both in terms of its narrative complexity and the density of its historical references. Second, the fact that it was commissioned might suggest that the *Histories* is less representative of Machiavelli's true intellectual trajectory than more 'autonomous' or 'spontaneous' works like the *Discourses*, and so ought to be treated as a relatively marginal contribution to his oeuvre. Third, Machiavelli cannot be expected to have written candidly about Florentine history in the *Histories* because it was commissioned by the Medici and he knew only too well how dangerous it was to cross them. One can hardly expect Machiavelli to have jeopardized his long-awaited professional rehabilitation (or safety) by sending his patrons a book they would not like.³⁰

The third of these concerns is the most serious and difficult to answer because it calls into question the reliability of the text itself. How can we possibly know if Machiavelli altered his portrayal of Florentine history in such a way as to satisfy his Medici patrons? In [Chapter 4](#), I argue that a close reading of the *Histories* reveals the presence of literary strategies that enabled Machiavelli to speak the truth about the Medici without offending them. These strategies include the use of irony and other modes of rhetorical dissimulation to convey multiple possible meanings, similar to what one finds in Tacitus's histories of imperial Rome.³¹ For the purposes of this book, I group these strategies under the more general heading of

²⁹ This was not always so: Jacques Gohory (1520–1576), one of Machiavelli's first and most dedicated translators, considered the *Histories* to be a source of political knowledge superior in relevance and utility to anything written by the greats of antiquity (see Anglo 2005, 210–213). Likewise, David Hume (1711–1776), John Adams (1735–1826), Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), and Karl Marx (1818–1883) all celebrated the *Histories* for shedding light on the great problems of modern politics and took themselves to be serious students of the *Histories* in this respect.

³⁰ The very first letter that Machiavelli wrote after being released from prison (March 13, 1513), in which he tells his friend Vettori that he intends to be more "wary" of Medici power in the future, testifies to this caution (Atkinson and Sices 1996, 221). That said, however, the *Histories* is not exceptional in having sensitive political entanglements: *The Prince* and the *Discourses* were also dedicated to powerful and partisan *grandi* whom Machiavelli surely attempted to please, or at least not offend. On Machiavelli's evolving relationship with the Medici family, see Butters 2010.

³¹ It should be no surprise that Machiavelli looked to Tacitus for guidance in writing about pseudo-republicanism, especially while under its surveillance. For a helpful discussion of Tacitus's dissimulative writing style, see O'Gorman 2000. On dissimulation in early modern rhetoric generally, see Snyder 2009. Machiavelli's relationship with Tacitus is explored Toffanin 1921; Strauss 1958; Schellhase 1971 and 1976; Sasso 1987–1997;

“multivocality,” a term that denotes the capacity of a single utterance to convey different meanings to different audiences.³²

Take, for example, Machiavelli’s reference to the “wonderful equality” (*mirabile ugalità*) that was obtained in Florence when the magnate order was finally defeated (FH 3.1). This passage could be interpreted as saying a number of different things: that Florence’s newfound equality was “wonderful” in the sense of being admirable; or that it was “wonderful” in the sense of being pleasing; or that it was “wonderful” in the sense of being astonishing; or that it was “wonderful” in the sense of being miraculous; or some combination of these qualities.³³ It is also possible that Machiavelli is using the term “wonderful” ironically, to mean the opposite of its literal meaning. Typically, we think of textual interpretation as a matter of deciding which one of these possible meanings was the one that Machiavelli actually intended to convey. But it is also possible that Machiavelli deliberately crafted the *Histories* in such a way as to convey some or all of these possible meanings – not because he necessarily *believed* them all, but rather because they allowed him to speak the truth while also saying what he *should*.³⁴

In Chapter 4, I hold that Machiavelli uses multivocality to authorize subversive readings of the *Histories*, or interpretations of the book that supplement, modify, and even contradict the meaning it was intended to have for the Medici. As I will show, Machiavelli found this technique most useful in writing about the delicate subject of Medici power because it permitted him to critique it in the form of praise. When Machiavelli describes the Medici as “virtuous” in the *Histories*, for example, he is obviously invoking the traditional and flattering sense of the word: but he is also, perhaps, invoking the unconventional and (at least potentially) unflattering meaning of “virtue” from *The Prince*.³⁵ Indeed, I argue, Machiavelli

Fontana 2009 and 2013. On dissimulation as a rhetorical feature of Machiavelli’s work, see especially Strauss 1958 and Benner 2009.

³² On the self-conscious multivocality of Renaissance Florentine art, see Randolph 2002. Importantly, this way of thinking about the rhetorical dimension of the *Histories* does not ask readers to discount or ignore portions of the text by deeming it the author’s “exoteric message.”

³³ On the complex ways in which Renaissance writers thought about “miracles” and the “miraculous,” see Bow 1996.

³⁴ This dual intention is suggested in Machiavelli’s letter to Guicciardini from August 30, 1524, in which Machiavelli declares that he will write the later portions of the *Histories* – presumably those dealing with the Medici – in such a way that “while still telling the truth . . . no one will have anything to complain about” (Atkinson and Sices 1996, 351).

³⁵ Interestingly, Machiavelli allows for the possibility that, should the Medici discern the subversive dimension of the *Histories*, it may actually please them. Musing that “if these

uses multivocality to perform other rhetorical actions, too. For example, in describing the Medici as “virtuous,” he is both praising them and exposing a key element of their political strategy. Moreover, Machiavelli’s use of multivocality has the effect of casting doubt on the notion that the Medici were *genuinely* virtuous men at all, even raising the possibility that certain “virtues” ought to be reclassified as vices given what the Medici were able to do with them. Finally, Machiavelli uses multivocality to capture the ambiguity and evasiveness of the Medici regime itself, which owed so much of its success to the plasticity of its political profile.

In writing about the Medici, Machiavelli stresses their many “virtues.” As the Dedicatory Letter explains, the *Histories* is a book that showcases “the goodness of Giovanni, the wisdom of Cosimo, the humanity of Piero, and the magnificence and prudence of Lorenzo.” In [Chapter 4](#), I argue that Machiavelli attributes the growth of Medici power to these virtues. As Machiavelli shows in Book 2 of the *Histories*, the city’s ancient nobility had openly and violently attacked the central institutions of the Florentine Republic upon their founding, to no avail. Mindful of this outcome, Machiavelli explains, the Medici had later employed a more insidious strategy of co-optation with far greater success, relying on their reputation for “virtuous” conduct to defuse republican opposition and elicit popular sympathy and support. In rejecting Florence’s republican politics, magnates had unashamedly expressed the very same arrogance, envy, selfishness, greed, and ambition that had drawn the city’s *popolo* to republicanism in the first place. By contrast, the Medici had offered a more calculated show of amiable and seemingly innocent traits like kindness, generosity, loyalty, patriotism, and compassion – and they succeeded where their predecessors had failed. With this new arsenal in hand, they had captivated a vast clientele of dependents, supporters, and ‘friends’ from all ranks of Florentine society who could be relied upon to respect and obey their will. And thus 100 years of republican exertion was supplanted by nearly 300 years of princely rule.

very noble writers [i.e. Bruni and Poggio] were restrained so as not to offend the memories of those whom they had to reason about,” Machiavelli concludes that “they were deceived and showed they knew little about the ambition of men and the desire they have to perpetuate the name of their ancestors as well as their own: nor did they remember that many who have not had the opportunity to acquire fame through some praiseworthy deed have contrived to acquire it with despicable things. Nor did they consider that actions that have greatness in themselves, as do those of governments and states, however they are treated or whatever end they have, always appear to bring men more honor than blame” (FH pref.).

Machiavelli believed this story about Florentine political history was a useful one for republicans to know for its explication of princely ambition. Until the fourteenth century, Florentine historical experience had reinforced certain stereotypes about princely ambition inherited from Rome: that actual or prospective tyrants (*reges* or *domini*) were characterized by arrogance (*superbia*), brutality (*saevitia*), lust (*libido*), greed (*avaritia*), cruelty (*crudelitas*), and other vices associated with undisciplined or disordered appetites; that such men typically used force (*vis*) to acquire their power and compel obedience to their command, often employing a personal bodyguard for this purpose; and that they were prone to acting capriciously, especially in dispensing punishments, thereby instilling fear and uncertainty among their subjects.³⁶ Set apart by a “vile lust for kingly power” (*foeda cupiditas regni*), as Livy says Manlius Capitolinus was, a man of this sort was assumed to be recognizably hostile to law (*lex*).³⁷

Such associations were pervasive in Roman political literature, including works by Cicero and Seneca that were read throughout the medieval era. But whereas classical descriptions of tyranny had been appropriate enough in capturing the attitudes and behaviors of Florence’s magnate order, the Medici had since proved that tyrants could present another face as well, and Machiavelli relays the story of their rise to power to demonstrate the inadequacy of this older interpretive frame. Quiet, peaceable, modest, restrained, obliging, patriotic, and deferential to law – the Medici hardly *looked* like tyrants, as Cosimo himself argued before the Signoria when accused of plotting to usurp the government, and this was surely one explanation for why Florentines had found it so difficult to identify them as such, even after they had brought the government entirely under their control. By using the Medici to demonstrate how these qualities have been used to conceal, and even to advance, princely ambitions, Machiavelli hopes to show that defenders of republican liberty need to adopt a keener, more wide-ranging skepticism of *grandi* than had republicans of the past. Machiavelli cautions especially against believing that liberty is necessarily safer in commercial societies like Florence, in which even dangerously powerful men are acculturated to behave sociably. Indeed, Machiavelli argues that republics have *more* to fear from princely types

³⁶ On Roman stereotypes of tyranny, see Dunkle 1967 and 1971; Vasaly 1987; and Frazel 2009.

³⁷ Livy 1919–1955, 6.20.

who paint the “indecenty” of their political ambition with “some less indecent color,” as the Medici did.³⁸

In presenting themselves as good men dedicated to advancing the moral, political, economic, and spiritual well-being of their fellow citizens, the Medici could accurately describe themselves as benefactors – but not, as Machiavelli reminds us, *republicans*. His critique of the Florentine people in the *Histories* is that they had failed to appreciate this essential distinction. Instead, they had permitted figures like Cosimo Medici to accumulate enormous social, economic, and political powers on the condition that such powers were well-used. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli suggests that Romans had made the same mistake with Julius Caesar, who was allowed to acquire “favor” for “works that appear[ed] to have some virtue in them” (D 1.33) and thereby “do evil under the shadow of good” (D 1.46). Men like these had converted the republics in which they lived into principalities by convincing the public that it was in their interest to set aside the rule of law. While Machiavelli fully recognizes that such arguments are often correct – often it *is* the case that a population would be better off, materially, under some form of princely rule – he insists that republican citizens reject these arguments nevertheless as incommensurate with a principled commitment to liberty.³⁹

This was how early Romans had responded to Spurius Maelius’s attempt “to take up extraordinary authority in Rome and to gain the plebs for himself by conferring on them many benefits” including land and cash payments, Machiavelli reminds his readers in D 3.8: “they refused him altogether, since it appeared to them that Spurius wished to give them the price of their freedom.” So it was with Manlius Capitolinus too. While the Roman people had often favored Manlius as someone who advanced their “utility,” Machiavelli explains, when it was discovered that Manlius

³⁸ Versions of this phrase appear throughout Machiavelli’s work (e.g. P 18; D 1.34, 3.6, 3.28; FH 1.23, 2.18, 2.21, 3.5, 6.13, 7.5, 8.10). Ironically, Machiavelli attributes this particular formulation to Lorenzo Medici himself, folding it into a public speech in which Lorenzo is attempting to execute precisely this rhetorical maneuver (FH 8.10). For my analysis of this speech, see [Chapter 4](#).

³⁹ McCormick has offered a different reading of Machiavelli on this point, holding that Machiavelli’s republicanism is primarily concerned with securing popular economic interests and friendly to those elites – even princes – who choose to serve them (2009; 2010, 84–85, 87, 196; cf. 2010, 28). However, this interpretation has difficulty accounting for Machiavelli’s sharply negative portrayal of ‘popular’ elites like Manlius Capitolinus, Spurius Cassius, Spurius Maelius, and Julius Caesar. This confusion surfaces especially in McCormick’s struggle to locate the “criterion” whereby Machiavelli condemns Caesar as a tyrant in D 1.10, 1.17, 1.29, and 1.34 given Caesar’s redistributive economic policies (2010, 84).

was plotting to make himself a king they did not defend their champion, but rather condemned him to death “without any respect” for either his “virtue” or earlier “good works” (D 3.8). According to Machiavelli, this is what true patriotism looks like:

Therefore I do not believe that there is an example in this history more apt to show the goodness of all the orders of that republic than this, seeing that no one in that city moved to defend a citizen full of every virtue, [and] who publically and privately had performed very many praiseworthy works. *For love of the fatherland was able to do more in all of them than any other respect*, and they considered present dangers that depended on him much more than past merits, so much that with his death they freed themselves. (D 3.8, emphasis added)

The reverse, however, can be expected of corrupt peoples, whose reasons for possessing what Machiavelli elsewhere calls a “slight aptitude for free life” (D 1.17) may be sympathetic but not exculpatory. As Machiavelli goes on to surmise in D 3.8, Manlius only failed to make himself king because his actions were “in discord with the times” – “if Manlius had been born in the times of Marius and Sulla, when the matter was already corrupt and he would have been able to impress the form of his ambition, he would have had the same results and successes as Marius and Sulla and as others later who aspired to tyranny after them.” Thus, Machiavelli concludes, “Manlius would have been a rare and memorable man” if he had been born in later times, when Rome was corrupt.⁴⁰

At issue in Machiavelli’s contrast between different “times” in D 3.8 is the strength of patriotic attachments, even in the face of private advantage. Crucially, he does not reduce the issue to a simple choice between right and wrong, nor does he minimize the costs that republican citizens may have to bear if they want to remain free. Manlius was someone who had performed many actions that were appropriately described as morally and politically virtuous, beneficial to the Roman people, or both: not only had he courageously defended the Capitol against Gallic invaders, he had also generously used his own money to save poor Romans from debt slavery and even loudly criticized the practice itself as a brutal and unjust violation of plebeian rights.⁴¹ In condemning him, Romans were setting all

⁴⁰ On the theme of corruption in Machiavelli’s work, see Shumer 1979; Bonadeo 1973; and Violi 1998, 131–142.

⁴¹ As Livy (1919–1959) relates, Manlius’s generosity earned him the title of *parenti plebis Romanae*, or protector of the Roman plebs (6.14). Livy emphasizes the absolute loyalty and devotion that Manlius was poised to claim from the plebs in a speech given by one of his beneficiaries, who announces to the assembled crowd that “[i]t is owing to M. Manlius that I can now look upon the light of day, the Forum, [and] the faces of my

this aside in the name of liberty. When confronted with the benefactions of the Medici, however, Florentines had made a very different choice – to repay their benefactors with enduring bonds of loyalty, obedience, and respect – not (even) because the moral or economic stakes were higher in Renaissance Florence, but because Florentines themselves interpreted and weighed these considerations differently.⁴²

1.5 Corruption, Ideology, and Political Culture

To a certain extent, Machiavelli treats republican liberty as a matter of good constitutional design. In this vein, as others have rightly noted, Machiavelli promotes institutional provisions for exposing social and political elites to popular surveillance, judgment, and punishment.⁴³ And yet Machiavelli also recognizes that constitutional orders “have need of being brought to life by the virtue of a citizen who rushes spiritedly to execute them” (D 3.1) and that this “virtue” cannot itself be fully institutionalized. This is why Machiavelli is unsurprised, if still disappointed, by the fact that even well-ordered republics like Rome tend to decay over time, and why he devotes so much of his attention to the many factors that affect the capacity of republican peoples to make their institutions work well. In [Chapter 5](#), I examine some of these factors, particularly the ways in which certain moral ideas, beliefs, and values drawn from the classical tradition undermine the effective operation of republican modes and orders.

Machiavelli’s criticism of traditional morality in *The Prince* is well-known, and it has long served as the basis for his reputation as the first philosopher to recognize the “autonomy and necessity of politics.”⁴⁴ But his attention to the sometimes poor fit between moral and political ends

fellow citizens; from him I have received all the kindness which a parent can show to a child; to him I devote all that remains of my bodily powers, my blood, my life. In that one man is centered everything that binds me to my home, my country, and my country’s gods” (6.8).

⁴² The fact that Machiavelli concentrates so much critical attention on figures like Cosimo Medici and Julius Caesar makes it difficult to rest with claims that Machiavelli is primarily invested in problems of “elite accountability” (see [note 38](#)).

⁴³ McCormick 2010.

⁴⁴ On Machiavelli’s criticism of classical and Christian morality in *The Prince*, see Gilbert 1951, and 1977b; Strauss 1958; Wood 1967; Hannaford 1972; Colish 1978; Orwin 1978; Berlin 1979 [1953]; Parel 1992; and Mansfield 1998b; cf. Lukes 1984; Benner 2009. On Machiavelli’s sense of the “autonomy of politics,” see Croce 1945, Chabod 1965 and 1993, and Cochrane 1961.

is not confined to *The Prince*, I argue, nor does he believe that traditional forms of good behavior are necessarily more conducive to republican liberty than princely power. Like *The Prince*, the *Discourses* and the *Histories* dispense with abstract assessments of familiar moral concepts and look instead to their “effectual truth” in the political domain, focusing especially on how traditional notions of virtue have enabled men like the Medici to rise to the standing of princes even in cities ostensibly guarded by republican institutions. Vickie Sullivan has ably drawn our attention to the anti-Christian dimension of Machiavelli’s republicanism, and particularly his sense that Christian virtues are not necessarily republican virtues and cannot be expected to promote republican politics. In [Chapter 5](#), I argue that Machiavelli also takes a skeptical view of the Roman social virtues, and especially certain aspects of *fides*, in light of their strong association with clientelism (in Machiavelli’s language, their tendency to foster “sects” [*sette*] and “parties” [*parti*]). Attentive to how these so-called virtues have been used by elites to amass significant extralegal powers, Machiavelli urges his readers to condemn them as the political vices they actually are.

In offering such counsel, Machiavelli positions himself – unexpectedly – as a critic of Roman political culture, especially as it pertains to modern republican endeavors. Consistent with his assertion in the early pages of the *Discourses* that republican citizens should “always have recourse to those judgments or those remedies that were judged or ordered by the ancients” (D 1.pref.), many of the defining treatments of Machiavelli’s republicanism have characterized it as an effort to revive and defend Roman virtue.⁴⁵ But, as I will show, Machiavelli’s effort to delineate the most potent sources of princely power forces a criticism of precisely these elements of Roman political life. Ultimately, he argues, Rome itself fell victim to its idealization of the very same prosocial attitudes and behaviors that would later underwrite the Medici party.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For example, Mansfield [1979](#); Huijling [1984](#); Viroli [1998](#); Coby [1999](#). Even Pocock’s ([1975](#)) depiction of the Atlantic republican tradition acquires a distinctively Roman cast when he turns to Machiavelli, who is said to have built on an originally Greek understanding of political virtue as a selfless dedication to the common good by specifying martial valor as the form of “participation” in which this idea of virtue obtains (199–204).

⁴⁶ Cf. Viroli [1990](#) and [1998](#), in which Machiavelli is portrayed as a defender of sociability. According to Viroli, Machiavelli believes a true citizen is a “magnanimous soul” bound to his fellow citizens by “friendship,” “solidarity,” and “love” (1990, 147, 157, 160).

Even among scholars who have highlighted his qualms about the supposed exemplarity of Rome, Machiavelli's concerns about patronage and its deep roots in Roman social and political culture have been overshadowed by attention to his anti-Christian, and ultimately anti-religious, views. But religion appears to have little relation to the political developments that Machiavelli identifies most closely with the decline of Roman liberty: the disintegration of Roman values, including the "honor paid to poverty" in the early Republic (D 3.25); the growth of economic inequality, and especially the rise of wealthy "gentlemen" (D 1.55); contentions surrounding the distribution of public land (D 1.37); the prolongation of military commands, which concentrated political expertise and reputation in the hands of a few and allowed leaders to convert their soldiers into partisans (D 3.24); the rise of *populares* like Marius and Caesar (D 1.17); or the diminishing authority of public institutions and more frequent recourse to "private forces," including extralegal violence, to destroy political rivals (D 1.7). In [Chapter 6](#), I argue that Machiavelli's concerns about "faith" in the *Discourses* has less to do with the development of a spiritualized, otherworldly posture among the Roman people than clientelistic relationships secured through mutual loyalty and trust.

Finally, [Chapter 6](#) brings together these different strands of argument on behalf of a new picture of Machiavelli that finally gives his keen attention to political history its due. For Machiavelli, good political theory requires good historiography or it is a wasted enterprise. Political ideas and practices intertwine one another, and it is our responsibility to delineate their relationship from one moment to the next, however imperfectly. Otherwise, Machiavelli argues, our politics are blind and vulnerable, particularly to the interests of the powerful, and our political discourse risks becoming neither relevant nor even real. Understanding this relationship is the work of good historical writing, Machiavelli holds, and it is the work he undertakes on behalf of future republicans in writing the *Florentine Histories*.

Another Republicanism

Poggio praises Florence all he can.
A patriot, true – but no historian.¹

Machiavelli is often called a ‘humanist.’ First popularized by Felix Gilbert in the 1950s, the label is often used to deflate claims about the originality of Machiavelli’s political thought. In reviewing Leslie Walker’s 1950 translation of the *Discourses on Livy*, Gilbert himself used the association to criticize Walker’s introductory essay and its emphasis on the novelty of Machiavelli’s method.² According to Gilbert, the *Discourses* was hardly a path-breaking book, as Walker had made it out to be, but instead a reflection of Machiavelli’s growing investment in “the method and normative approach of humanism,” his “adoption of humanist concepts,” and his “inclination to accept orthodox humanism” more generally.³ Just two years later, Hans Baron offered a similar view in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, holding that Machiavelli’s republicanism amounted to a revival of “the youthful proud belief in the democratic liberty of Florentine life” that had been championed in early humanist writings like Bruni’s *Panegyric to the City of Florence*.⁴

¹ Sannazaro 1996, 179.

² Gilbert 1977a, responding to Walker 1950, 8. Conversely, Strauss (1953) criticizes Walker for understating Machiavelli’s originality. Strauss’s own interpretation of Machiavelli, published just five years later, casts him as a radical innovator who criticized humanists as “half-hearted admirers of antiquity” (1958, 92).

³ Gilbert 1977a, 132–133. For a helpful discussion of Gilbert’s evolving views on Machiavelli’s relationship with Renaissance humanism, see Connell 2000, 17 n.11.

⁴ Baron (1955) 1966, 428. Baron assimilates Machiavelli into the humanist historiographical tradition specifically, citing Bruni’s *Panegyric* as “the most vigorous and complete

More recently, Quentin Skinner has argued that Machiavelli's republicanism is fundamentally continuous with the political "outlook" of leading humanists like Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, and Poggio Bracciolini, and that Machiavelli's *Discourses* should be considered "a relatively orthodox contribution" to the humanist republican tradition because it is "basically concerned to uphold the same set of values" and "adopts the same analysis of the term 'liberty' as these earlier Florentine humanists had given."⁵ Similarly, Maurizio Viroli characterizes Machiavelli's republicanism as treading a humanist path, holding that it employs the "conventional meanings" of a republican vocabulary traceable to *quattrocento* humanists like Leonardo Bruni.⁶ According to Viroli, Machiavelli's deference to humanism is particularly evident in his restatement of "the contrast between corruption and political life . . . commonplace in humanists' works" and his traditionally humanist understanding of the "aim of politics," although he also "repeats" the "conventional theme of equality" found in humanist works and Salutati's view that "politics wants to the citizen to be good [sic]."⁷

One of the puzzling features of this scholarship, however, is its deafening silence on the subject of Machiavelli's savaging of Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini in the preface to *Florentine Histories*. Bruni and Poggio had authored the two most authoritative studies of Florentine history in existence when Machiavelli wrote his own, *History of the Florentine People* and *Florentine History* respectively, and yet Machiavelli opens the *Histories* by dismissing these works as being "of no use to readers or pleasure to anyone" – hardly the judgment one would expect from an acolyte. What are we to make of this surprise? In what follows, I explore some of the ways in which Machiavelli's *Histories* can be read as a critique of humanist historiography, particularly Bruni's account of Florence's early republican history, and I argue that these deviations reflect fundamental disagreements between Bruni and Machiavelli concerning the nature and aims of republican politics, lending support to a growing literature that has pushed back against Machiavelli's assimilation into a humanist paradigm.

expression of the new complex of politico-historical ideas that arose during the struggle against Giangaleazzo" and surmising that "[w]henever we explore the trends of the historical philosophy of the Renaissance . . . we find the [Panegyric] to be the pioneer to which must be traced the development that leads through Bruni's *History of the Florentine People* to Machiavelli and the other great Florentine historians of the late Renaissance (191).

⁵ Skinner 1978, 156–157.

⁶ Viroli 1990, 147–148.

⁷ Viroli 1990, 155–157.

Moreover, I argue that Machiavelli's *Histories* is sensitive to the ideological import of these differences. As he announces in the preface to the work, Bruni and Poggio had failed to provide their readers with a true education in republican politics: something that audiences could actually "use" to advance the cause of republicanism in their own times. Worse still, Machiavelli traces the "modes" and "orders" that Bruni and Poggio had employed in writing about the Florentine republican history to motives less scholarly than strategic. Instead of relaying the simple truth about the history of Florentine republicanism, Machiavelli alleges, they had refashioned it in such a way as to shield the city's most powerful families from the censure that a more accurate portrayal would invite. Thus (contra Sannazaro, quoted at the beginning of this chapter) Machiavelli does not think humanists were even the patriots they had claimed to be, for their loyalties stood not with the Florentine *popolo* and their interests but rather the city's *grandi*. Finally, Machiavelli implies that humanism has been complicit with the political designs of the Medici specifically. In the narrative of the *Histories* itself, Machiavelli relays crucial information about the political circumstances under which humanism flourished to suggest their conceptual and normative innovations were deliberately fashioned for Medici use, as ideological armaments for legitimating their regime as a species of republican government.

2.1 Debating the Point of Florentine Republicanism

The primary allegation that Machiavelli lodges against Bruni and Poggio in the preface to the *Histories* is that they had not "told everything in detail" that had happened in Florence before 1434, particularly regarding the city's history of "civil discords and enmities" and the "effects arising from them." According to Machiavelli, while they had been "very diligent" in their reporting of "the wars waged . . . by the Florentines with foreign princes and peoples," Bruni and Poggio had provided only a cursory treatment of the bitter conflicts that Florentines had fought against one another at home and their disastrous consequences – "they were altogether silent about the one and so brief about the other as to be of no use to readers or pleasure to anyone."

Machiavelli's charge here seems at first to be a perplexing one, especially in relation to Bruni's *History*, which contains many references to the strife and disunity that plagued Florence throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But it makes more sense when read alongside a careful comparison of the way that Bruni and Machiavelli choose to

integrate these references into a story about the genesis of Florentine republicanism.

On the one side, Bruni's *History* presents civil conflict as relatively marginal to the development of Florentine republicanism, which it presents as having deeper and more meaningful roots in the city's struggle to maintain its autonomy in the face of encroaching foreign powers. While Bruni often highlights connections between external and internal affairs, these links seem designed to reinforce the primacy of Florence's foreign wars. The shifting tides of Florence's domestic scene are used to explain the unevenness of its military and diplomatic endeavors, and Bruni makes the city's gradual progress in overcoming its internal divisions and reestablishing itself as a unified "Florentine people" capable of securing a final victory over its foreign enemies a major dramatic arc of the book. Likewise, Bruni often treats Florence's civil conflicts as epiphenomenal to foreign conflicts; secondary expressions of a more primary drama to which readers should look for an accurate understanding of what Florentine republicanism was once designed to accomplish and secure.

According to Bruni, Florentine republicanism originated as an effort to secure the city's independence from imperial authority. Taking Livy's history of Rome as his model, he structures his description of how Florence came to establish itself as a free city as an inversion of the traditional Roman narrative. Whereas Romans established themselves as a free people by expelling their king, Florentines freed themselves by withdrawing from imperial oversight. Fittingly, the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, appears in the *History* in a guise of a modern Tarquin king – haughty, violent, and overreaching – and his extreme cruelty, which Bruni emphasizes in the closing lines of Book 1, seems designed to recall Roman stereotypes of tyranny.⁸ The political reforms associated with the Primo Popolo were catalyzed by Frederick's tyrannical excesses, according to Bruni, and they amounted to a reconfiguration of the *imperium* formerly claimed and exercised by the emperors. "After the death of Frederick," Bruni announces, "whose shocking crimes we have already described, the Florentine people, having long been consumed with hatred for the arrogance and ferocity of those who had seized the commonwealth [i.e. Frederick's Ghibelline allies], roused itself to take the reins of government,

⁸ "For instance, when certain men of the other faction were captured and sent to him in Apulia under guard, whether to satisfy his own anger or to please his followers, he first put out their eyes and mutilated their limbs, then killed them with various tortures" (Bruni 2001, 1.83).

defend liberty, and to direct the affairs of the city-state in accordance with the popular will.”⁹

This gloss on the Primo Popolo frames a particular understanding of republican liberty: liberty as *territorial and popular sovereignty*. According to Bruni, what marked the beginning of Florence’s history as a free city was the devolution of sovereignty from the Emperor to the collective Florentine people, who claimed it by expelling local proxies of imperial power (Ghibellines like the Uberti) and erecting new, genuinely self-governing institutions in their place. Thus Bruni characterizes liberty as something Florentines “received” from the Emperor in 1250, who was henceforth replaced by the Florentine people itself as the city’s “lord.”¹⁰ Similarly, Bruni adduces the “sweetness of liberty” and a “prudent concern for preserving . . . liberty” so understood to explain why Florence immediately launched a series of new wars against neighboring cities like Pistoia, Volterra, Sienna, and Arezzo, maintaining that Florentines believed these offensives were necessary to secure its newfound independence against future threats.¹¹ These events mark the beginning of Bruni’s lengthy account of the many foreign wars that Florence valiantly fought in defense of its liberty, culminating with the great Visconti wars of the late fourteenth century, which Bruni characterizes as an effort by the Florentine people to prevent Milan from absorbing all the cities of Italy into a single kingdom.¹²

It was Machiavelli’s familiarity with older accounts of the birth of Florentine republicanism that allowed him to recognize Bruni’s version of events as the historiographic innovation it was. Earlier chroniclers like Giovanni and Matteo Villani, Dino Compagni, Matteo and Goro Dati, Giovanni Morelli, Gino Capponi, Piero Minerbetti, and Marchionne di Stefani had all recorded their own histories of early Florentine republicanism, and they had told a very different story about it, portraying it instead as a collective effort by the city’s *popolo* to break the power of local *grandi*. Quite unlike Bruni, who would later depict Florence as a city unified in its rejection of imperial authority, these chroniclers had portrayed it as an intensely divided city: fragmented into warring factions of the city’s elite, who, as a group, stood in tension with its lower and middle orders.¹³ This was the Florence they knew from direct experience,

⁹ Bruni 2001, 2.2. ¹⁰ Bruni 2001, 2.2.

¹¹ Bruni 2001, 2.2. ¹² Bruni 2001, 9.99.

¹³ For an overview of these themes in connection with the development of a “modern historical consciousness” in which events are traced to the complex interplay of social and political forces as opposed to divine providence, see Green 1972.

as successful merchants and respected members of the *popolo*, who, in many cases, had played an active role in the city's republican government during its violent and chaotic early years. And this, as we will see, is the Florence that Machiavelli recalls in the *Histories*.

Humanist writers had explicitly sought to discredit and supersede these older accounts of Florentine history, which they disparaged for having uncritically accepted widespread but unverified beliefs about the city's early history. Bruni, for example, announces in the preface to the *History* that his own retelling of Florence's initial founding will necessarily involve "rejecting some commonly held but mythical beliefs" on the subject, including the belief that Florence was founded by Julius Caesar, a commonplace of earlier historiography.¹⁴ In a similar vein, he scolds previous historians for perpetuating the legend that Florence had once been destroyed by the Gothic king Totila, only to be rebuilt by Charlemagne some 200 years later. According to Bruni, the sheer absurdity of the thought that Florence stood empty for so long or that Charlemagne repopulated it with Romans, as was said, makes plain the falsehood of such stories.¹⁵

What Machiavelli challenges in the *Histories* is the sleight-of-hand whereby humanists like Bruni had used these errors to license a comprehensive retelling of Florentine history, including the social and political circumstances out of which the city's republican institutions had been born. Take, for example, Bruni's analysis of Florence's guild-based priorate, also known as the Signoria. Guilds were the largest and most encompassing of Florence's many civic associations in the late medieval period, enrolling a full third of the city's adult male population in 1300.¹⁶ Even before the formation of the twelve major guild conglomerates that would acquire political standing with the constitutional reforms of the 1280s, Florence's earliest guilds had accumulated a number of legal, administrative, and even military prerogatives that marked them out as the city's most authoritative corporate institutions. Among these prerogatives was their right to defend guildsmen against violence perpetrated by noble families, and by 1281 Florence's major guilds had organized a militia of 1,000 strong (drawn from "those who love and cherish a good and peaceful state in the said city") to help local magistrates discipline these *grandi*.¹⁷ In 1282, several of the city's guilds formed their own political body, the priorate, and it rose to become the government's highest executive council in

¹⁴ Bruni 2001, pref., 1.1.

¹⁵ Bruni 2001, 1.76.

¹⁶ Najemy 1979, 59–60.

¹⁷ Becker 2002, 102.

1293. Earlier that year, the twenty-one guilds eligible to hold seats on the priorate formally declared themselves to be a defensive federation sworn to protect the security of all guildsmen against harassment, aggression, and bodily harm by local *grandi*, and every guild representative seated on the priorate was henceforth required to pledge that he would “preserve and defend the justice and right of guildsmen, so they are not oppressed or unduly burdened by any person or persons.”¹⁸ This aim was echoed in the mandate of the priorate itself, which was to secure “true and perpetual peace and union, preservation and growth of the peaceful and tranquil state of artisans and guilds, all people, and the whole commune and the citizens and districts of Florence.”¹⁹

Several of Florence’s chroniclers had discussed these intentions at length. For example, Compagni’s *Chronicle* relates how the priorate originated as a collective effort by the Florentine *popolo* to ensure that “the small and weak should not be oppressed by the great and powerful [*grandi e potenti*].”²⁰ Inspired by “the candid words of . . . [*popolani*] who spoke of their liberty and the injuries they had suffered” at the hands of their powerful neighbors, he says, men like himself had devised the priorate “to aid the merchants and guildsmen whenever necessary” in the face of these local sources of fear and insecurity.²¹ As proof of this claim, Compagni points to the fact that Florence’s first priors had to be shut up in a tower “so they did not have to fear the threats of the powerful” they were charged with policing, and they alone were permitted to move about the city with an armed guard. After all, he notes, when one of Florence’s first priors successfully “compelled the nobles to obey the laws,” they had retaliated by drowning him in a cistern.²²

Bruni, however, describes the priorate as a way of terminating Ghibelline interference in the city’s domestic affairs, catalyzed by a new war against the Holy Roman Emperor, Sicily’s rebellion against Charles of Anjou, and renewed Ghibelline activity in Umbria and the Marche. Two years earlier, Bruni explains, Cardinal Landino had formed a coalition government of Guelfs and Ghibellines; but amidst the renewed “distrust and suspicion” toward Ghibellines aroused by these international events, “Florentines decided to get rid of the power-sharing arrangement with the Ghibellines who had previously taken part in the government of the commonwealth” and replace it with a council of three Priors of the Guilds.²³ Again, Bruni assimilates Florentine republican history into a

¹⁸ Quoted in Najemy 2006b, 83. ¹⁹ Becker 2002, 98. ²⁰ Compagni 1986, 1.4–1.5.

²¹ Compagni 1986, 1.5. ²² Compagni 1986, 1.6. ²³ Bruni 2001, 3.58.

more encompassing narrative about the city's independence from foreign powers.

2.2 Machiavelli on Florence's History of Civil Conflict

Machiavelli's treatment of Florentine foreign affairs in the early books of the *Histories* is markedly different than Bruni's, and it seems designed to undermine the notion that Florence's republican political identity was forged in the crucible of foreign domination. Whereas Bruni had insisted that Florence's hard-fought wars of independence, initially against the Holy Roman Emperor and later the Visconti, formed the relevant context for making sense of its reinvention as a free republic, Machiavelli offers two reasons for thinking it cannot be made to do this narrative work.

First, according to Machiavelli, Italy was never as hazardous a political environment as Bruni makes it out to be. At least since the fall of the Roman Empire, Italian lords had been so weak and corrupt that one can hardly imagine a scenario in which they posed a truly existential threat to Florence. Moreover, the wars they fought among themselves were so feeble and inconclusive as to have formed an unlikely stage for the enactment of civic virtue, as Bruni had claimed. Machiavelli summarizes his portrait of the "vileness" of Italian arms in *Histories* 5.1, explaining that while Italian affairs could never be called "quiet" they were also never "dangerous through the harshness of war." Indeed, Machiavelli goes so far as to wonder if the language of "war" is even appropriate to describe the conflicts of modern Italian history, for "they cannot be called wars in which men are not killed, cities are not sacked, [and] principalities are not destroyed." So much for the glamour and urgency of Florentine foreign affairs.²⁴

Second, Machiavelli argues that Florence did not break with imperial authority for the reasons that Bruni gives in the *History*. Whereas Bruni describes Florentines as having collectively thrown off the yoke of imperial power in the name of collective autonomy, Machiavelli recasts it as a strategy undertaken by the city's "men of middle" to extinguish civic

²⁴ Eventually, Machiavelli relates, these so-called wars "came to such weakness that they were begun without fear, carried on without danger, and ended without loss" (FH 5.1). In the *Histories*, Machiavelli traces this sad situation to the ascendancy of *condottiere*, who have "made . . . and bond and understanding together" and "reduced war to an art in which they would temporize, so that most times both one side and the other of those who were waging war would lose" (1.39).

factionalism before it could “ruin” Florence entirely (FH 2.4). As Machiavelli explains, Florence had been rent by violent conflicts fought among the city’s elite families since 1215 and these factions had since affiliated themselves with Guelfism and Ghibellinism in the hope of bolstering their power domestically. In 1250, Florence’s Guelf faction was in exile in Valdarno and, with Frederick’s death later that year, moderate forces saw an opportunity to “reunite the city” by inviting its Guelf families to return (FH 2.4). But any hope of preserving this “united” condition rested on Florence’s dissociation from the Holy Roman Empire, which could be expected to replenish Ghibelline ambitions as soon as it recovered its own strength (FH 2.4). According to Machiavelli, this is what the middling element of Florentine society was trying to secure by reconstructing the city’s political and military institutions while imperial power was still at its nadir: civic unity and peace.

While Machiavelli hardly believes that Florentine republican history was unaffected by the city’s foreign entanglements, he insists on treating them as conditioning or limiting factors in the city’s pursuit of certain domestic goods. Ultimately, however, these goods were being held hostage by forces only incidentally related to foreign powers. Following the lead of Villani and other chroniclers, Machiavelli’s uses a well-known vignette about one of the city’s earliest recorded feuds to explicate the true social and political problems that Florentine republicanism was devised to solve. The tale concerns a broken engagement in 1215 between two of the city’s most powerful families, the Buondelmonti and the Amidei. As Villani’s version of the story goes, a young man from the Buondelmonti clan jilted an Amidei woman in order to marry a member of the Donati family instead. This insult and dishonor filled the Amidei with “accursed indignation,” and they immediately mobilized their allies for revenge.²⁵ After briefly debating whether the offending Buondelmonti should be punished “by beating or killing,” it was agreed by the conspirators that he should be slain.²⁶ Shortly afterward, Messer Buondelmonti was “dragged from his horse by Schiatti degli Uberti, and by Mosca Lamberti and Lambertuccio degli Amidei assaulted and smitten, and by Oderigo Fifanti his veins opened and he was brought to his end.”²⁷ While the decision to kill Buondelmonti had been made on Mosca Lamberti’s sinister observation that “a thing done is ended,” it had no such effect. Instead of terminating the dispute, Buondelmonti’s murder divided the entire city into contending parties.

²⁵ Villani 1907, 5.38.

²⁶ Villani 1907, 5.38.

²⁷ Villani 1907, 5.38.

Machiavelli interrupts what is otherwise an extremely compressed narrative in Book 2 of the *Histories* to recount this event in some detail, explaining that although the Buondelmonti-Uberti feud is “very well known” among contemporary Florentines, having been “celebrated by Dante and many other writers,” it is nevertheless worth retelling in the context of his own examination of the city’s political history, presumably because it sheds light on the nature of the city’s political divisions more generally (FH 2.3). His version of the story preserves the key elements of the traditional account, including a heavy emphasis on the antiquity, wealth, and prestige of the families responsible for the conflict; attention to how the episode was driven by undisciplined emotions on both sides; and reference to the murder as an act of revenge undertaken in retaliation for an “injury” done to the Amidei and justified with the “trite and famous phrase, ‘A thing done is ended’” (FH 2.3). Like Villani, he notes that Buondelmonti’s murder took place under a statue of Mars that had been erected by the city’s Roman founders and he highlights the fact that extensive interfamily alliances meant that it immediately caused “the whole city” to erupt in violence (FH 2.3). If there is a major innovation to be found in Machiavelli’s account, it is his accentuation of the role played by social ambition in causing these “evils”: whereas Villani had blamed “the inspiration of the devil” for Buondelmonti’s infatuation with the Donati woman, Machiavelli says his “ardor” was inflamed by consideration of her estimable beauty, bloodline, and dowry (FH 2.3).²⁸

Surprisingly, this story is nowhere to be found in Bruni’s narration of the events leading up to the founding of the Florentine Republic. Only much later in Book 2 of the *History* does Bruni circle back to it, using it, perversely, to illustrate why later Florentines were so eager to use intermarriage within the ranks of the nobility as a way of ensuring “the future tranquility of the city.”²⁹ Here Bruni explains that he had not bothered to address the war between the Buondelmonti and the Amidei/Uberti parties in earlier sections of Book 2 because it was unrelated to its thematic focus on the political reforms of 1250. As a legal and institutional expression of Florentine independence from the Holy Roman Empire, Bruni says, these reforms had been more closely associated with an older, ideologically-driven conflict between the Guelf and Ghibelline parties. According to Bruni, the Guelf/Ghibelline dispute was a matter of high principle: the Guelf party was “essentially composed of those who were more inclined

²⁸ Villani 1907, 5.38.

²⁹ Bruni 2001, 2.104; see also 2.105–2.109.

to embrace the liberty of peoples” and “considered it degrading for Germans and barbarians to rule over Italians under the pretext of the Roman name” whereas the Ghibelline party “had forgotten the liberty and glory of their ancestors” and consisted mainly of “men who preferred to serve foreigners rather than be ruled by their own people.”³⁰ Thus, as Bruni tells it, the offensive treatment of the Amidei by the Buondelmonti merely added “a stormy impetus” to these “existing causes of division” among the Florentine people, which were primarily rooted in their conflicting “prejudices” concerning the legitimacy of imperial authority.³¹

By restoring the Buondelmonti-Uberti feud to its proper place in the story of Florentine republicanism, Machiavelli also reasserts its significance for understanding the original meaning and aims of Florentine republicanism. Even more than Villani had, he stresses the primacy of elite competition within the city, animated by the desire to command and oppress that Machiavelli elsewhere identifies as the defining political attribute of *grandi*. In his own telling of the story, it was the killing of Buondelmonti that first “divided the whole city” (FH 2.3) – only later did these factions become associated with the Guelf and Ghibelline parties, when the Emperor pledged his support to the Uberti side in exchange for their support against the pope:

And Florence remained in these travails [i.e. conflicts between allied clans] until the time of Frederick II, who was convinced that because he was the king of Naples, he could increase his forces against the Church. *To solidify his power in Tuscany he favored the Uberti and their followers, who, with his favor, drove out the Buondelmonti; and thus was our city divided, just as Italy had been for a long time, between the Guelfs and Ghibellines.* (FH 2.4, emphasis added)³²

Notably, Machiavelli's explanation for how Florence came to be infected by Guelf and Ghibelline partisanship rejects not just Bruni's claim that Florentine political divisiveness had its roots in these affiliations, but also (and by extension) Bruni's stress on the *ideological significance* of Guelfism and Ghibellinism. For Machiavelli, Guelfism and Ghibellinism

³⁰ Bruni 2001, 1.81. ³¹ Bruni 2001, 2.105.

³² Here Machiavelli is departing somewhat from Villani. According to Villani, the Buondelmonti murder was the “cause and beginning of the accursed parties of Guelfs and Ghibellines in Florence” (1907, 5.38) in the sense that it catalyzed the division of the broader Florentine population into the Guelf and Ghibelline parties, which had already divided the nobility against itself. Machiavelli, by contrast, holds that Guelfism and Ghibellinism became salient political identities *within the Florentine nobility itself* as a result of the Buondelmonti/Uberti feud (FH 2.3).

did not appeal to the Florentine nobility because of the political principles that each side represented, as Bruni had maintained. Rather, they were attractive because of the additional support these affiliations could provide to local, warring *consorterie* already “strong in houses, towers, and men” (FH 2.3).

Machiavelli’s emphasis on the anti-elitism of early Florentine republicanism continues throughout Book 2 of the *Histories*. Each of the city’s major constitutional reforms is prefaced by some reference to the obnoxious behavior of *grandi*, often an anecdote intended to illustrate this group’s most offensive and destructive traits – the same toxic brew of pride, cruelty, envy, arrogance, and greed that had once featured so prominently in the city’s political literature and marked *grandi* out to their contemporaries as a suspect class. The reforms themselves are depicted as popular efforts to defend the safety and well-being of the wider community against these types. As we have already seen, Machiavelli portrays the Primo Popolo as an effort by Florence’s common people to tamp down the factional violence associated with the Buondelmonti-Uberti feud (FH 2.4–2.5). Likewise, the priorate is described as an institution formed to “keep the powerful in check” after an initial effort to address the overbearing behavior of the ascendant Guelf nobility had begun to fail; they had “become insolent and did not fear the magistrates,” Machiavelli explains, with the result that “every day many homicides and other acts of violence were done without any punishment for those who committed them because they were favorites of one or another of the nobles” (FH 2.11). The office of Gonfalonier is described as a supplement to the Priors and Captain of the People when they failed to “avenge” the injuries that were being done by nobles “every day [to] someone of the people” (FH 2.12); the Ordinances of Justice as a reaction to their renewed “insolence,” which manifested in “the people suffer[ing] the same injuries from the great” as they had before (FH 2.12–2.13); and the Executor of Justice as yet another measure intended to “act . . . against the insolence of the great” (FH 2.22).

Also like the chroniclers who had preceded him, Machiavelli identifies the main threat to republican liberty during this period as the ability of nobles to avoid being punished for their transgressions, typically by intimidating witnesses and magistrates. For example, even after the priorate was established for their protection, Machiavelli explains, “[e]very day someone of the people was injured, and neither the laws nor the magistrates were sufficient to avenge him because every noble, with his relatives and friends, would defend himself against the forces of the

Priors and Captain" (FH 2.12). Echoing Villani, Machiavelli relates that the people attempted to "remedy this inconvenience" by creating the Gonfalonier of Justice, who, it was hoped, could overpower defiant *grandi* using the city's popular militias (FH 2.12).³³ But the effectiveness of this reform was short-lived, Machiavelli goes on to say, for while the office of Gonfalonier "struck them with great terror at first" (FH 2.12), it was quickly converted into yet another crooked tool of the city's *grandi*, who were as inventive as they were willful in reacquiring their former powers. The nobility soon "reverted to their insolence," he recounts, "for as some of them had always been from the Signori, they had the means to prevent the Gonfalonier from being able to do his duty. Furthermore, since the accuser always needed to have a witness when he received some offense, no one would be found to testify against the nobles" (FH 2.12). In this way, Machiavelli concludes, "Florence returned" in a "brief time" to "the same disorders and the people suffered the same injuries from the great, because the judges were slow and their sentences lacked executions" (2.12).

Accordingly, while the *Histories* occasionally refers to Florence's major legislative councils (e.g., 2.39 and 3.9), Machiavelli's retelling of Florentine republican institutional history focuses more on the development of the city's criminal justice system, including those civil and military orders created for the purpose of helping officials to investigate and punish the crimes perpetrated by *grandi*. These orders included the *podestà* and Captain of the People, two foreign judges "who were to judge cases, civil as well as criminal, arising among citizens" (FH 2.4); twenty local militias, intended to serve as the "defender" of these judicial offices (FH 2.5); the Gonfalonier, who "was to be ready with his standards and his armed men to favor justice any time he might be called upon by them or by the Captain" (FH 2.12); the legal procedures and penalties established by

³³ Villani holds that Florence's great families were initially too consumed by their own "broils and discords" to pay much attention to these innovations, for when the priorate was first established "there was a great war [underway] between the Adimari and the Tosignhi, and between the Rossi and the Mozzi, and between the Gherardini and the Manieri, and between the Calvacanti and the Buondelmonti, and between the Buondelmonti and the Falconieri, and between the Bostichi and the Foraborschi, and between the Foraboschi and the Malispini, and among the Frescobaldi themselves, and among the family of the Donati themselves, and many other noble houses" (1907, 8.1). Similarly, Machiavelli reports that "[i]t was easy for the guilds to make [the Gonfalonier] because of the grave enmities that remained awake among the nobles, who did not pay any attention to the provision made against them until they saw the severity of that execution" (FH 2.12).

the Ordinances (FH 2.13); and the public prisons that were constructed together with the Palazzo Vecchio in 1298 (the most famous of which, “le Stinche,” was named after the family estate of the first magnates incarcerated within it [FH 2.22]).

2.3 Republicanism and Elite Power

Humanists had not altogether ignored this way of thinking about the meaning and purpose of republican government; but they had subordinated it to other, potentially conflicting ideas about what marked Florence out as a free city. Bruni’s *Panegyric to the City of Florence* (c. 1403–1404), for example, lauds the Florentine government for using its powers to defend the weak against the strong, asserting that:

There is no place on earth where there is greater justice open equally to everyone. Nowhere else does freedom grow so vigorously, and nowhere else are rich and poor alike treated with such equality. [...] Now when very powerful men, relying on their wealth and position, appear to be offending or harming the weak, the government steps in and exacts heavy fines and penalties from the rich. It is consonant with reason that as the status of men is different, so their penalties ought to be different. The city has judged it consistent with its ideals of justice and prudence that those who have the most need should also be helped the most. Therefore, the different classes are treated according to a certain sense of equity; the upper class is protected by its wealth, the lower class by the state, and fear of punishment defends both. From this arises the saying that has been directed very often against the more powerful citizens when they have threatened the lower classes; in such a case the members of the lower class say: ‘I also am a Florentine citizen.’ With this saying the poor mean to point out and then to warn dearly that no one should malign them simply because they are weak, nor should anyone threaten them with harm simply because someone is powerful. Rather, everyone is of equal rank since the Florentine state itself has promised to protect the less powerful.³⁴

But this hardly features as Florence’s leading attribute in the *Panegyric*, let alone its most glamorous quality: the splendor of its architecture, its wealth and prosperity, the distinction of its Roman ancestry, the moral fiber of its citizens, its religious devotion, its leading role in Italian affairs, and its impressive territorial acquisitions – all of these are praised for being equally beautiful “ornament[s]” of this most inspiring city.³⁵ Moreover, Bruni lodges his encomium to the legal protections originally

³⁴ Bruni 1978, 173. ³⁵ Bruni 1978, 174.

associated with Florentine liberty within a distinctly oligarchic vision of the city's political organization. Instead of presenting them as concessions by *grandi* to an energetic and unyielding *popolo*, as previous chroniclers had and as Machiavelli later would, he figures them as benefits derived ultimately from the "harmonious cooperation" of the city's different parts and especially the self-directed benevolence and generosity of its leading citizens, who are said to exercise their powers with such "diligence and competence that one could not find better discipline even in a household ruled by a solicitous father."³⁶ And so the revolutionary demands of the Florentine people were replaced by the gift of paternalism.

Bruni's stress on the "diligence and competence" of city magistrates in the *Panegyric* reflects the special emphasis that humanists placed on moral and political excellence as a criterion for distributing political authority. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the regulatory focus of Florentine republicanism – its emphasis on supervision and management, and especially the oversight of local *grandi* – had made inclusivity a guiding principle in the organization and distribution of state power: hence the plethora of available offices, the brevity of the terms for which they could be held, the preference for sortition over election in dispersing them, the disqualification of kin groups for a period of three years after being drawn for a particular seat, and so on. Magistrates were not expected to have substantial political experience or special expertise in the responsibilities associated with their offices, nor were they expected to be distinguished by exceptional qualities of character.

As John Najemy has shown, this stress on inclusivity had always been contested by *grandi*, who had argued from the start that power should be allocated with a view to more restrictive (and self-serving) criteria.³⁷ Humanists of the fifteenth century would later advance similar views, but now in the context of reviving the political wisdom of Aristotle and Cicero, which they used to substantiate more exclusive answers to the question of who should rule. In his dialogue "On Civil Life" (1429), for example, Bruni's student Matteo Palmieri acknowledges that while *civiltà* had once meant the life of peaceful sociability that was the aim of the early Florentine Republic, he follows "wise men" in redefining it as the complete possession of moral and intellectual virtue (what Nicolai Rubinstein has summarized as "a condition of human perfection") and assumes a suitably restricted audience of *civili*: not *all* Florentine citizens, but only

³⁶ Bruni 1978, 173. ³⁷ Najemy 1982a.

those who truly *deserve* to hold public office because of their exceptional virtue.³⁸

Bruni's *History* participates in this effort to recuperate a certain vision of elite rule. While castigating the vanity and combativeness typical of the magnate order, the *History* bolsters arguments on behalf of other *grandi* – men of *true* nobility – who were said to have a constructive role to play in republican political life. As early as his discussion of the priorate, Bruni emphasizes the distinctive qualities of the city's commercial class as indicative of its special claim to political power. In characterizing the newly established priorate as a "form of administration [that] was populist to the highest degree," Bruni means to highlight something other than what one might expect given earlier descriptions of the institution.³⁹ Whereas chroniclers like Compagni had described the priorate as a 'popular' institution in the sense that it was dedicated to protecting the safety and well-being of the *popolo* against fractious *grandi*, Bruni uses the term to denote its workmanlike character. According to Bruni, the priorate was "populist" in the sense that it empowered the middling element of Florentine society, which was "more inclined to carrying on business in peacetime than to engaging in war and strife."⁴⁰ These were "frugal and peace-loving persons," Bruni says, each accustomed to dutifully "exercising his own métier" without concern for the partisan disputes that so many of their neighbors could not help but indulge.⁴¹ The hope, it seems, was that this segment of the Florentine population would bring its neutrality and sober industriousness to the work of government. In support of this aim, Bruni relates, "[t]hese men were immured in the palazzo of the commune, forbidden to deliberate about anything except public business, and maintained at public expense."⁴² No mention is made of the security concerns that had once featured so prominently in connection with these innovations.

A clearer version of this argument can be found in Bruni's account of how the Ordinances of Justice came to be passed in 1292. The Ordinances

³⁸ Rubinstein 1987, 48. Cited in Najemy 2000, 93. ³⁹ Bruni 2001, 3.59.

⁴⁰ Bruni 2001, 3.59. For a discussion of Bruni's conception of "the Florentine People" here and elsewhere in the *History*, see Hankins "Mirror for Statesmen," 10–12.

⁴¹ Bruni also, importantly, distinguishes "the people" from the "lazy" (i.e., the poor) who "have to feed off the goods of others" (2001, 3.59). The implication seems to be that poor Florentines are unsuitable candidates for magistracies because their weakness and dependency encourages venality. On Bruni's unsympathetic portrayal of Florence's lower classes in connection with the Ciompi Rebellion, see Chapter 4.

⁴² Bruni 2001, 3.59.

were among the most potent weapons for maintaining civic order at the disposal of the priorate. Echoing Compagni's description of the priorate itself, Villani explains that these regulations were designed to "set a remedy and defense against the . . . plague" of elite violence, and especially the use of "force and violence" by the city's most powerful families against all those "who might not resist them."⁴³ More specifically, he says, their aim was to stem the worst effects of the "envious and arrogant" nature of *potenti*, finally putting a stop to the "murders . . . wounds, and outrages" precipitated by their "pride" so that others – *i popolani e impotenti* – could finally enjoy the peace and security characteristic of a "good life."⁴⁴ These "strong and weighty laws," as Villani describes them, were first drafted in 1281, and while they were revised many times over the next several decades, they always had two major aims: first, publically identifying the most lawless and aggressive *grandi*; and second, minimizing inter-elite violence and its inevitable spillover into the wider community.⁴⁵ Accordingly, the Ordinances listed the names of any "men of power [*grandi e possenti*]" as should do wrong or violence against the people" and declared their entire families magnate.⁴⁶ It then subjected these magnates to a variety of penalties and exclusions: they were prohibited from carrying arms within the city limits; they were required to post a sizable bond that would be forfeited if they participated in vendettas; they were compelled to swear an oath of peace and obedience every year before the city's public magistrates; and they were made ineligible to hold most public offices, including the priorate.⁴⁷ The Ordinances also sought to limit the social and material bases of magnate power by prohibiting *popolani* from assembling outside their houses during periods of civic unrest and barring the sale of property to magnates without the express consent of adjacent landowners.⁴⁸

The language of the Ordinances conveys just how harshly magnates were treated under the governments of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. According to the Ordinances of 1295, for example, it was announced that "if any magnates . . . should, with malice aforethought, kill or have killed or wound or have wounded any *popolano* of the City and District so that blood should ensue," the *podestà* "should condemn

⁴³ Villani 1907, 8.1. Compagni himself says the Ordinances were first proposed when "the nobles and great citizens [*nobili e grandi cittadini*]" of Florence were "swollen with pride [*insuperbiti*]" and "did many injuries to the *popolani*, beating them and committing other offenses." Accordingly, the Ordinances targeted *grandi* "who might commit outrages against the *popolani*" (Compagni 1986, 1.11).

⁴⁴ Villani 1907, 8.1. ⁴⁵ Villani 1907, 8.1. ⁴⁶ Compagni 1986, 1.11.

⁴⁷ Lansing 1991, 197–203. ⁴⁸ Lansing 1991, 198 and 201.

the magnate, who did or caused to have done such a crime, to death by beheading.”⁴⁹ In these cases, the *podestà* was also authorized to confiscate or destroy the offending magnate’s property and claim the bonds posted by his family to secure their good behavior. Any magnate caught wounding a *popolano* “in the face so that blood spurts from the wound and the wound is disfiguring, or should wound or cause him to be wounded, with malice aforethought, in any member so the member should be permanently disabled” was fined 2,000 lire.⁵⁰ If he refused to pay the fine, the Ordinances declared that “his right hand should be amputated so that it is severed from his arm” so that he would lose his ability to handle a sword.⁵¹

In the *History*, Bruni defends the Ordinances eloquently and at length, both in his own voice and in a speech attributed to Giano della Bella. As della Bella is made to say, the Ordinances were necessary to “check the arrogance of powerful families” whose noxious attitudes and behaviors endangered Florentine liberty.⁵² How can any Florentine call himself free when “men who deserve prison and punishment” for their violent crimes are permitted to continue “strutting like lords around the city with crowds of armed retainers, terrifying us and the magistrates,” della Bella asks his listeners? “How is this condition different from tyrants who kill, expropriate, take whatever they want without fear of judgment? And if one man of this sort can destroy liberty in one city, what shall we think of our city where it happens simultaneously at the hands of so many?”⁵³

And yet, even as Bruni reiterates these arguments on behalf of the Ordinances, he is careful to portray them as laws that *would never have existed* were it not for the extraordinary leadership of men like della Bella. In the *Chronicle*, Villani had singled della Bella out as a “rich and powerful” leader of the people who “among others” set about finding a way to end the “plague” of elite violence.⁵⁴ Bruni, however, gives him a far more prominent role, suggesting that della Bella’s foresight and persuasiveness were indispensable in mobilizing a lazy, timid, indecisive, and short-sighted *popolo*. Della Bella himself is said to have complained privately about “the inertia and passivity of the People,” and more specifically “how they kept letting individuals suffer injustice, [and] how they failed to realize that they were all as a group being threatened by shameful servitude.”⁵⁵ Indeed, Bruni relates that della Bella viewed popular

⁴⁹ Adcock 1995, 143. ⁵⁰ “Ordinances of Justice,” 1995, 143.

⁵¹ “Ordinances of Justice,” 1995, 143. ⁵² Bruni 2001, 4.28. ⁵³ Bruni 2001, 4.28.

⁵⁴ Villani 1907, 8.1. ⁵⁵ Bruni 2001, 4.27.

indifference to magnate violence as the “height of stupidity” and attacked the *popolo* itself for being so “stupid” as to complain about the lethargy of magistrates when it was really they who were “dazzled by the nobility” and “spiritless and negligent” in tending to their own affairs.⁵⁶ Haranguing the people for having allowed themselves to be treated like slaves, della Bella ultimately blames their suffering less on the viciousness of the nobility than their own “degenerate passivity.”⁵⁷

Bruni’s discussion of the Ordinances is meant to show that men of “elevated and outstanding character” such as della Bella can be relied upon to defend the public interest and that republics like Florence depend on their guardianship to function well.⁵⁸ As this episode suggests, Bruni’s main complaint about the early republic is that it did not readily accept the leadership of these men. This complaint frames the story that Bruni goes on to tell about how the Florentine people came to appreciate, and acquiesce to, its best men (*ottimati*) and how the Florentine Republic became ever more successful as power collected in the hands of men actually capable of doing the work of good government. The two lessons that Bruni derives from these historical experiences are, first, that a republic’s best men have an obligation to use their talents for the public benefit (according to Bruni, della Bella himself is said to have argued that a man such as he should always “put aside his own interests when his country needs his advice”⁵⁹) and, second, that other citizens have an obligation to respect and comply with their stewardship.

Bruni’s preference for talking about republican liberty in terms of territorial sovereignty helps to advance this argument by underscoring the value of qualities, skills, and resources concentrated, or thought to be concentrated, among *ottimati*. The idea of republican liberty that had actually taken shape in the early republic offered precious little ground for arguments on behalf of giving disproportionate power to a few. Indeed, such a policy would have defeated the very purpose of republican government as it was then understood, which more than anything else was to *limit* the power of the (already) powerful. Yet, when redefined in such a way as to privilege the city’s independence vis-à-vis foreign powers, and by extension the successful negotiation of its military and diplomatic affairs, Bruni’s tale of Florentine liberty could be viewed as compatible with, even dependent upon, the delegation of power to a smaller circle of distinguished men.

⁵⁶ Bruni 2001, 4.27 and 4.31. ⁵⁷ Bruni 2001, 4.27.

⁵⁸ Bruni 2001, 4.34. ⁵⁹ Bruni 2001, 4.31.

This is the point of Bruni's story about Florence's catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Montaperti in 1260, which he portrays as a disaster precipitated by the impetuosity and inexperience of magistrates drawn from the lower and middle ranks of the *popolo*. Explaining how the city was lured into attacking Siena by Ghibelline exiles who pretended to have knowledge of a conspiracy against the Siennese government, Bruni puts the blame for this error squarely on the shoulders of those "plebeian men, ignorant in the art of war . . . who tend to predominate in magistracies" when they are distributed as widely as Florence's were during the Primo Popolo.⁶⁰ He makes a point of criticizing these magistrates for ignoring the "sounder counsels" of "the men of distinction [*illustres viri*] and the military experts," who came out strongly against the expedition.⁶¹ Alarmed by the "rashness of the scheme," which had already gained the widespread support of the Florentine people, they had sent one of their own, Tegghiaio d'Aldobrando Adimari, "an eloquent man of great authority at that time," to argue for a more cautious policy.⁶² Bruni reports that Tegghiaio made a strong case not just for remaining close to home, but also for taking a deferential posture toward "men who have had some experience of such affairs" who, moved by their "[l]ove of country," offer their fellow citizens "seasonable counsel."⁶³ But "the magistrates did not give the speech a fair hearing, as it seemed to expose their own imprudence," Bruni continues, and it was viciously attacked by "a fierce and shameless fellow named Expeditus, the sort of person unrestrained liberty can sometimes produce," who accused Tegghiaio of cowardice.⁶⁴ In the end, the "rashness" of the magistrates outstripped the wisdom embodied in "[t]he best course" advised by Tegghiaio, and the city embarked on war – "not so much out of concern for their allies' perils," Bruni relates, "nor led by any particular goal, but simply to avoid the appearance of being afraid of their enemies."⁶⁵

Machiavelli certainly shares the view that a well-ordered republic makes full use of its most talented citizens, and he sees nothing wrong with distributing even quite considerable rewards to its most accomplished members. But he never allows the *utility* of the few to become an argument for treating them with the kind of respect that Bruni believes they deserve. In the spirit of Florence's own tradition of popular republicanism, Machiavelli takes the work of republican politics to include preventing *grandi* from acquiring the social esteem that enables them to flout the law with

⁶⁰ Bruni 2001, 2.37.

⁶¹ Bruni 2001, 2.37 and 2.38.

⁶² Bruni 2001, 2.38.

⁶³ Bruni 2001, 2.39 and 2.40.

⁶⁴ Bruni 2001, 2.48.

⁶⁵ Bruni 2001, 2.50 and 2.51.

impunity or (worse) make the state itself an instrument of their princely ambitions. A republic, in his view, is not well-ordered when its citizens regard the powerful – even the most “virtuous” among them – with the reverence that Bruni takes to be their due. Rather, it is well-ordered when its citizens retain the ability to punish even the greatest among them *sanza alcuno rispetto* when they “sin in anything against the free state” (D 1.7). This focus on preventing *grandi* from transgressing the limits on power that define a civil way of life (D 1.7), including limits on social power in the form of reputation (*riputazione*) and authority (*autorità*), implies a fundamentally different set of judgments about the trajectory of Florentine history in the 200 years after the founding of the republic. For Bruni, the increasingly oligarchic character of Florentine republicanism in the fourteenth century is a sign of progress, maturation and self-fulfillment while, for Machiavelli, it is a symptom of failure and defeat.

Machiavelli’s treatment of the early history of the republic reflects this very different sense of what the task of republican politics is. Bruni’s attack on popular judgment in the context of discussing the Battle of Montaperti is entirely gone in the *Histories*, and the event itself is described in a single line: “From there [Siena] they asked for help from Manfred, king of Naples, and, through the industry of Messer Farinata degli Uberti, the king’s men defeated the Guelfs near the Arbia River with such slaughter that those who were saved from that defeat, judging that their city was lost, took refuge not in Florence but in Lucca” (FH 2.6). Likewise, in recounting how the Ordinances of Justice were first promulgated, Machiavelli acknowledges that Giano della Bella “inspired the heads of the guilds to reform the city” along these lines (FH 2.13) but he repeats none of Bruni’s allegations regarding the lethargy or idiocy of the *popolo*. Instead, Machiavelli repurposes the story in such a way as to highlight the envy and malice of other *grandi*: resentful of della Bella’s growing popularity for having “freed [Florence] from servitude to the powerful,” he writes, other magnates destroyed him “as soon as opportunity allowed” (FH 2.13).

Perhaps most striking is the difference of opinion between Bruni and Machiavelli on the subject of sortition. Sortition was introduced as a method for allocating magistracies in 1328, and it came to be regarded as the very backbone of Florentine republicanism. It kept, or was supposed to keep, political power from being monopolized by any single faction. In discussing this reform, Bruni makes no reference at all to this argument on its behalf. Instead, he strongly objects to it on the grounds that it decreases the overall competence of public officials. Sortition may

have been useful in “prevent[ing] quarrels” of the sort that were regularly provoked by competition for office in the early years of the republic, he concedes, holding that it was primarily for this reason that sortition was introduced in the first place.⁶⁶ But this advantage does not outweigh the harm done to the state by the fact that “most of the time unworthy persons are assumed into the magistracy” and, worse, “it extinguishes the zeal for virtue” among citizens generally, who do more to preserve a good “reputation” when it is rewarded by votes.⁶⁷ Taking it as evident that “the earlier practice [of voting for magistrates] was much better and more useful to the state,” Bruni holds that sortition has only survived due to the “popular favor” it enjoys – presumably because most Florentines recognize that they could not hope to compete with *ottimati* under a more meritocratic system.

Machiavelli also criticizes the reforms of 1328, but his point in doing so is entirely different. In his view, these reforms did not go *far enough* in preventing *grandi* from hijacking the very institutions that existed to check their power. His focus is not on the randomized distribution of offices per se, but rather the scrutiny (*squittino*) used to generate the pools from which candidates were drawn. As ordered in 1328/9, thousands of nominations were collected and secretly reviewed by an eighty-five-member council every three to five years. Names approved by two-thirds of the scrutiny council were then placed into bags, and magistrates would be drawn from these bags every few months until the next scrutiny was held. As Machiavelli points out, it was really *this* procedure that was intended to diffuse the “tumults” associated with office-holding, not randomized selection (FH 2.28). Echoing Bruni, he maintains that Florentines “did not understand the defects that were hidden under this small advantage” (FH 2.28). A few chapters later, Machiavelli expressly fingers the ability of *grandi* to manipulate baggings to their own advantage while maintaining the appearance of a fully inclusive process.⁶⁸

The powerful citizens had two ways of increasing or maintaining their power: one was to restrict the baggings of the magistrates so that they would always come either to themselves or to their friends; and the other was for them to be the heads of the election of the rectors so as then to have judges favorable to them. And so

⁶⁶ Bruni 2001, 5.80. ⁶⁷ Bruni 2001, 5.81.

⁶⁸ Consistent with Machiavelli, Najemy has described these electoral reforms as a “watershed moment” in the history of Florentine politics in which its nominally republican regime came to be restricted to an oligarchic elite without any obvious violation of its constitutional structure (Najemy 2006b, 131).

highly did they value this second policy that when the ordinary rectors were not enough for them, they sometimes added a third. (FH 2.32)

As Machiavelli explains in Book 7, these deceits were perfected by Cosimo Medici a century later and they served as the institutional lynchpin of the Medici regime for the next seventy years. Immediately following his recall from exile in 1434, Cosimo's allies made "new lists for the lot, removing from the bags their enemies and filling them with their friends" (FH 5.4). By 1466, Machiavelli tells us, the city's electoral system was so thoroughly corrupt that Cosimo could use a truly *random* sortition to discipline his own partisans and defend his power (FH 7.2).

2.4 The Partisanship of Humanist Historiography

Machiavelli's republicanism in the *Discourses* takes its bearings from Florentine republicanism as it was once represented in the political literature of his city. His distinction between *grandi* and *popolo* (D 1.4); his description of these rival humors as the desire to oppress and the desire not to be oppressed (D 1.4, 1.16; see also P 9); his qualified defense of tumult (D 1.4); his conception of law as a check on appetite (D 1.1); his description of liberty as a civil way of life (D 1.3, 1.7, 1.9, 1.55, 2.2) secured through the rule of law (D 1.4) in which the common good is defined as "being able to enjoy one's things freely, without any suspicion, not fearing for the honor of wives and that of children, not to be afraid for oneself," that is, not being "offended" by one's fellow citizens (D 1.16); his emphasis on the development of civic institutions designed to "crush" *grandi* who attempt to put themselves beyond the reach of law (D 1.7); and his condemnation of partisanship as the key means by which *grandi* manage to do this successfully (D 1.7, 1.16, 3.22, 3.28) – all of these tenets and principles are residues of Florentine republicanism.

The *Florentine Histories* constitutes Machiavelli's most avid attempt to recover and resuscitate the memory of Florentine republicanism so understood. While the *Discourses* bears the impression of Florentine republican history in its general conceptualization of republican politics, the *Histories* does the more primary work of reinstating these concepts within the political history of Florence itself. As Machiavelli endeavors to show, these were the categories and values that were fundamentally at issue in Florence's own republican past, including its long history of civil discord. In using these concepts to explicate Florentine divisions and their effects, Machiavelli believed that he was working against a humanist tradition

that had not fully accounted for one or the other – an oversight that Machiavelli explicitly sets out to repair in his own recapitulation of Florence’s republican past.

For Machiavelli, Bruni’s failure to properly convey Florence’s long history of domestic conflict constituted a serious dereliction of a historian’s chief responsibility, to say something *useful*. In advancing utility as a key criterion of historical writing in the preface to the *Histories*, Machiavelli echoes ironically the historical standard that Bruni had claimed to believe and uphold in his own work. Unlike medieval chroniclers, who were supposed to have simply cobbled together lists of events without critically examining their importance or attempting to construct a coherent narrative about them, Bruni had selected out what was actually important about the past with a view to the enduring questions and problems of human existence – or so he had alleged. Bruni explicitly attributes this didactic value to the *History*, explaining that:

What attracted me [to the task of writing a history of Florence] was the greatness of the actions this People performed: first its various internal struggles, then its admirable exploits against its immediate neighbors, and finally, in our own time, its struggle as a great power against the all-powerful duke of Milan and the aggressive King Ladislas [of Naples]. . . . These actions seemed to me very much worthy of record and remembrance, and I thought that acquaintance with them would serve both public and private ends. For if we think men of advanced years are wiser because they have seen more of life, how much greater is the wisdom history can give us if we read it carefully! For there the deeds and decisions of many ages may be scrutinized; from its pages we may learn with ease what behavior we should imitate and avoid, while the glory won by great men, as therein recorded, inspires us to perform acts of virtue.⁶⁹

But Machiavelli sees no reason to believe that Bruni’s *History* is capable of doing any such thing: not because he disagrees with Bruni’s premise concerning the educative potential of historical writing, but because he believes that Bruni had bent Florentine history out of its proper shape. What Bruni had selected to tell and to emphasize, Machiavelli argues, came at the expense of the most central political concerns and struggles of the Florentine people. Thus, according to Machiavelli, Bruni had erred in the choices he made of those elements most deserving of remembrance.

In the preface to the *Histories*, Machiavelli calls Bruni and Poggio – rather dutifully, it seems – two “excellent historians.” But what he goes

⁶⁹ Bruni 2001, pref.

on to say about them, if correct, proves the contrary. In choosing to downplay, and in that sense suppress, firsthand reports of Florence's long and damaging history of domestic conflict, and especially its calamitous political divisions between *grandi* and *popolani*, Bruni and Poggio had discredited themselves as historians. Worse, they had revealed themselves to be *bad citizens* and *bad men*. Consistent with the wider humanist tradition, Bruni had maintained that it was impossible to disentangle the didactic value of a particular historical record from the special virtues of its author. Truly instructive histories are made, after all, not found, as Bruni himself reminds us in the *History*; and so he uses the book's preface as an occasion to praise himself as its author, declaring that in writing about Florentine republican history he had solemnly embraced "the special duty of scholars" to "rescue" great deeds "from oblivion and fate," a duty that so many before him had shirked to the detriment of "the public good." According to Bruni, it was thanks only to his own extraordinary virtues – wisdom and good judgment, courage, industriousness, patience, and fortitude, and most of all patriotism – that something as instructive as the *History* existed at all.

Claims of this sort made it impossible for Machiavelli to criticize Bruni in the preface to the *Histories* without also criticizing Bruni himself. Still, he makes little effort to blunt the force of what would inevitably be read as a personal attack. Indeed, in some places Machiavelli goes so far as to question Bruni's political acumen and even loyalty. For example, when Machiavelli dares to speculate about the reasons behind Bruni's poor choices in constructing his narrative, his first guess is that Bruni (and Poggio) had failed to appreciate just how consequential partisan conflict in Florence had been, surmising that "these actions seemed to them so feeble that they judged them unworthy of being committed to memory by written word." Either they were shockingly ignorant of the fact that Florence was plagued by civil divisions throughout its history and that "[f]rom such divisions came as many dead, as many exiles, and as many families destroyed as ever occurred in any city in memory," or they were indifferent to it. Machiavelli here implies that perhaps Bruni and Poggio simply did not care about these painful calamities, so untouched were they by the suffering of their adopted countrymen.⁷⁰

These are cutting allegations to be sure, and the fact that Machiavelli broaches them at all reveals something of his animus toward these

⁷⁰ Neither Bruni nor Poggio were native Florentines, and Bruni's loyalty to Florence appears to have been questionable during the 1430s (Field 1998).

writers. But a subsequent suggestion as to why they had overlooked Florence's long history of civil conflict is the most compromising by far: "they feared that they might offend the descendants of those they might have to slander in their narrations" (FH pref.). Simply stated, they had "restrained" their pens to avoid insulting or embarrassing families with a history of behaving badly. While Machiavelli does not say precisely whom they feared offending in this way, it was no secret that both Bruni and Poggio were deeply indebted to the Medici family for their numerous professional accomplishments.⁷¹ In putting the reputation and interests of their personal benefactors before the welfare of their city (or, borrowing language from the *Discourses*, by refusing to accuse *grandi* "without respect" whenever they were found to have transgressed the limits that define and support a free way of life [D 1.7]), Bruni and Poggio had exposed themselves as infected by the very disease of partisanship which they happened also to have minimized in describing the behavior of earlier generations. For Machiavelli, who argues vociferously that partisanship is what has corrupted every attempt to secure Florentine liberty, humanists were thus complicit in the subversion of its republican identity and at least partly to blame for the fact that Florence has never been free (D 1.49).

In the narrative of the *Histories* itself, Machiavelli provides historical evidence to suggest this complicity between humanism and the Medici

⁷¹ For example, Bruni, a native of Arezzo, had acquired Florentine citizenship and extraordinary tax exemptions in 1416 with the help of the Medici (Martines 1963, 168; Field 1998, 111). In return, Bruni had dedicated his translations of pseudo-Aristotle's *Economics* (1419–1420) and Plato's letters (1426) to Cosimo Medici (Ianziti 2008; see also Field 1998, however, on the heterogeneity of Bruni's clientelistic ties). While Bruni's distinguished career as a chancery official (1410 and 1427–1444) began under the Albizzi, it appears that his candidacy for the position in 1427 received crucial support from the Medici (Black 1985, 108) and he retained his post even after the Medici supplanted the Albizzi in 1434 – a favor that could not have been lost on Machiavelli, who had not enjoyed the same leniency at the hands of the newly reinstalled Medici regime in 1512. At this point, Bruni had already begun work on the *History*; but three new books would be drafted over the next five years, under the gaze of the Medici, and it appears that Bruni rushed their completion in February 1439 in the hopes that they would bolster his efforts to renew his ample tax privileges and get them extended to his descendants – privileges that were, indeed, granted to him just a day after he presented the expanded *History* to the Signoria (Hankins 2008, 22). Bruni also held several noteworthy public offices under the Medici, including seats on the Council of Twelve Good Men, the Ten of War, the Eight of Security, and even the Signoria itself (Martines 1963, 170–175). Given how tightly the Medici controlled seats on these councils and, moreover, the fact that chancery officials were generally expected to avoid such entanglements, it seems clear that Bruni enjoyed special favor with the Medici. On the expectation that chancery officials remain politically neutral and the corruption of this norm by the Medici, see Black 1990, 84–85.

was not accidental. Whereas Rome earns Machiavelli's praise in *Histories* 5.1 for having expelled its philosophers at the urging of Cato the Elder, who recognized the "evil" that could result from their continued activity within the city walls, Cosimo Medici, we are told, devoted considerable energy and personal resources to supporting the production of humanist scholarship in the years following his rise to power. Despite the fact that Cosimo was himself "without learning," Machiavelli recounts, he was nevertheless a "lover and exalter of literary men" who actually imported foreign intellectuals like John Argyropoulos into Florence and abundantly sponsored their work, even inviting Marsilio Ficino to live with him and his family so that he "might pursue his studies of letters more comfortably" (FH 7.6). As Machiavelli suggestively puts it, Cosimo arranged matters in this way so that he "might be able to use him [Ficino] more conveniently" (FH 7.6). Likewise, Machiavelli reports, Cosimo's grandson Lorenzo, himself a student of Ficino, also "loved marvelously anyone who was excellent in art," including several "men of letters" like Poliziano, Cristoforo Landino, Demetrios Chalcondylas, and Pico della Mirandola, whom he attracted and supported with his extraordinary "munificence" (FH 8.36). Indeed, so concerned was Lorenzo with ensuring that "Florentine youth might be trained in the study of letters" that he founded the University of Pisa in 1473, "a school to which the most excellent men in Italy were to be brought" and birthplace of the very word *humanista* (FH 8.36).

The *Histories* does not sideline these accounts of Florence's development as a hub of artistic and literary creativity. Rather, Machiavelli uses them to suggest that humanists were actively recruited by the Medici to carry out an ideological agenda; one that Florentines should have recognized and opposed as something dangerous to their liberty, as true republicans like Cato had prudently done. In addition to using *Histories* 5.1 to highlight the idea that philosophy can have real political implications and to underscore the possibility that it can be detrimental to republican politics, Machiavelli mobilizes the wider narrative context of his discussion of Medici patronage in such a way as to suggest that humanist scholarship was nurtured and exploited for ideological ends. For example, references in the *Histories* to Cosimo's sponsorship of humanism are situated within a broader description of the "foundation" of Medici power, which Cosimo bequeathed to his descendants in the hope that "the authority [he] had in Florence, they could have not only in that city but in all of Christendom" (FH 7.6). Similarly, the *Histories* portrays Lorenzo's carefully assembled stable of writers, poets, translators, and philosophers as

analogically akin to the physical fortifications that Lorenzo constructed just outside the city to that “he might live in his state more quietly and safely and so that his enemies could be fought or held off at some distance from himself” (FH 8.36).

2.5 Rewriting the History of an Ideology

Machiavelli’s effort to displace Bruni’s portrayal of Florentine republican political history has been something of a failure, at least among political theorists. One important reason why is because Quentin Skinner, still the most cited source of information about the intellectual history of republicanism, has adopted a straightforwardly (and often explicitly) Brunian narrative. According to Skinner, Italian republicanism originated in the thirteenth century as part of an effort by Lombard and Tuscan city-states to assert their sovereignty against the Holy Roman Empire. As he puts it in *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1975), his seminal work on the history of modern republicanism, the “long struggle” for independence fought by cities like Florence during this era produced an “armory of ideological weapons” designed to “legitimate this continued resistance to their nominal overlord.”⁷² The most crucial of these weapons (the “essence of their response to the Emperor’s demands,” as Skinner puts it) was the republican ideal of liberty, which justified the Florentine cause by endowing it with meaningful normative significance.⁷³ In attempting to repulse the Emperor, Skinner explains, Florentines claimed to be asserting their “right to preserve their ‘liberty’ against any external interference,” precisely as Bruni says they did.⁷⁴

Skinner leverages this story about the political conditions under which Florentine republicanism originally took shape on behalf of an interpretive argument concerning its central ideas. According to Skinner, Florentine writers advanced two “clear and distinct” understandings of what

⁷² Skinner 1978, 6. ⁷³ Skinner 1978, 6.

⁷⁴ Skinner 1978, 6. In making this argument, Skinner relies heavily on Bartolus of Sassoferrato’s explication of ‘liberty’ in the language of Roman law, which, he claims, Bartolus offered in support of an ongoing struggle for Italian independence. However, Skinner’s analysis overlooks the curious fact, noted by Ryan (2000), that by the time that Bartolus wrote “[t]he emperor . . . was a far less serious problem than the pope, yet the pope is barely mentioned by Bartolus” (78). This observation suggests to Ryan that Bartolus’s legal innovations were actually intended to address problems of domestic political accountability in a time of widespread civic instability.

it meant to be free as part of their rhetorical offensive against imperial power: first, “the right to be free from any outside control of their political life,” and second, “their corresponding right to govern themselves as they saw fit.”⁷⁵ Together, Skinner maintains, these ideas formed the concept of liberty that stood at the very center of Italian republicanism into the sixteenth century, when it was reaffirmed once again in Machiavelli’s *Discourses*.⁷⁶

Leaving aside the details of the interpretive argument that Skinner is making here with regard to the *Discourses* (which, as should now be clear, I do not believe to be correct), note simply that Skinner is attempting to read Machiavelli on the back of a history of Florentine republicanism *that Machiavelli himself contests*. As we have seen, Machiavelli holds that Florentine republicanism originated in response to an altogether different problem: not the threat of foreign domination, but various forms of popular oppression at home. Apart from the obvious pressure this alternative history of Florentine republicanism puts on Skinner’s argument concerning Machiavelli and his position within the republican tradition, it calls into question our very sense of “the republican tradition” as it has been shaped by Skinner’s research. To be clear, my point is not simply that alternative histories of republicanism *can* be told, in some abstract sense, but that they *have* been told – and have been told in response to precisely that version of republican political history that Skinner accepts as a matter of objective fact.

Machiavelli’s *Histories* thus points to a weakness of Skinner’s approach to the study of intellectual history, at least as it has been utilized in relation to the history of Florentine republicanism. Skinner’s contextualism is premised on the assumption that political ideas are developed as “answers” to political problems. This was a view previously expressed by Hans Baron in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (1955), a book that proposes to show the impact that a “new and significant experience in the politico-social sphere” can have on the character of our “ideas of man and life.” Twenty years later, Skinner challenged Baron’s story regarding the development of humanist ideas in *Foundations* by demonstrating that such ideas did not appear “with comparative suddenness” around 1400, as Baron had claimed, but instead formed gradually in a variety of “pre-humanist” works ranging from legal defenses of communal independence penned by scholastics like Bartolus of Sassoferrato to

⁷⁵ Skinner 1978, 6–7.

⁷⁶ Skinner 1978, 157–158.

administrative guidebooks written for city officials by *dicatores*. Skinner's correction to the Baron thesis, as it has become known, has garnered much attention; but Skinner never takes issue with Baron's claim that humanist ideas served (and were intended to serve) ideological purposes. In fact, Skinner endorses Baron's basic sense of humanism's ideological profile: just as Baron maintains that humanism was essentially "a political ideology meant to vindicate and emphasize the special virtues of Republican civic life" amidst the rise of signorial governments like Milan,⁷⁷ Skinner holds that "the most plausible" explanation as to why humanists made the political arguments they did was that "in reviving and extending the available traditions of Republican political theory" they hoped "to celebrate and defend the liberties of Florence against the continuing threat of domination by Milan."⁷⁸ Moreover, Skinner's broader understanding of how we should think about the origin and function of political ideas is fully consistent with Baron's own approach to the study of intellectual history. Like Baron, Skinner holds that "political life sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate," inferring from this observation that intellectual historians must always begin their work by acquainting themselves with "the relevant characteristics of the societies in and for which they originally wrote."⁷⁹

Whether or not it is true that all political ideas are formed in this way and therefore more clearly elucidated by this approach, it remains to be seen how effectively Baron and Skinner use it to locate the true meaning and significance of *these* particular ideas: that is, how confident we should be that they have used historical evidence to correctly identify the "point" of humanist efforts to articulate and defend the particular vision of republican politics they did. Skinner himself warns that identifying which facets of a society are relevant for explicating political ideas is a difficult task, in part because "[w]hen we attempt . . . to locate a text within its appropriate context, we are not merely providing a 'background' for our interpretation; we are already engaged in the act of interpretation itself."⁸⁰ That is, our judgments about which aspects of a particular historical moment are most relevant to interpreting a political idea must necessarily rely, to a greater or lesser extent, on presuppositions *about* that idea. Moreover,

⁷⁷ Baron (1955) 1966, 27. ⁷⁸ Skinner 1978, 103.

⁷⁹ Skinner 1978, xi. ⁸⁰ Skinner 1978, xiv.

any claim about what really mattered to people in any given historical moment is itself an argument about the salience of certain political ideas; one that must be substantiated with reference to evidence that is not itself subject to interpretive dispute, or at least not implicated by the particular interpretive dispute at hand.⁸¹

As Skinner himself might have predicted, then, it is precisely here that his explication of Florentine humanism runs into difficulty. For information about the “main problems” facing Renaissance Florentines when humanists wrote, and hence the political context in terms of which their work should be interpreted, Skinner relies almost entirely on the direct testimony of humanists themselves. On its face, this seems like a reasonable enough approach. But it discounts the possibility that humanist historiography was *itself* an ideological enterprise, one that had as its objective *redefining* the “main problems” of the time. For example, it may be true, as Bruni maintains and both Baron and Skinner accept, that one of the main problems of Florentine politics during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was the rising tide of signorial government in Italy; and further, that humanists were primarily interested in defending the superiority of republican values against this external threat. But it is also possible that one of the main problems of Florentine politics during this period was the questionable legitimacy of its own oligarchic government, and that humanists used the political and intellectual rivalry between Florence and Milan as a pretext for articulating a new schedule of republican values more consistent with it. To know which of these possibilities is correct, one would need to consult evidence beyond what humanists themselves are willing to volunteer.

In sum, Baron and Skinner recommend interpreting humanism ideologically but advance a naïve view of what its ideological significance may have been. This surely accounts for some of the distance that has opened up between political theorists, who have largely accepted Skinner’s depiction of humanism and with it many elements of a broader story about republican political history, and historians, whose familiarity with a wider array of evidence concerning the nature and development of Florentine republicanism has made them considerably more skeptical about humanist self-presentations, and who have gravitated toward questions about

⁸¹ This is disappointing given the fact that Skinner elsewhere defends contextualism as a way of avoiding the various “mythologies” associated with interpretive prejudgment. For a more detailed criticism of this claim, see Clarke 2013.

the precise nature of its relationship with Medici power.⁸² Machiavelli, as I have shown, anticipates this more uncertain posture in the *Histories*, arguing that humanism, like most political things, is not necessarily what it seems to be.

⁸² For alternative treatments of the ‘politics’ of Florentine humanism, see Hankins 1992, 1995, 1996; Seigel 1966; Martines 1963; Brucker 1963 and 1979–1980; Najemy 1982a and 2000; Jurdjevic 1999; Brown 1986 and 1992.

Italy after the Inundation

But I should hymn the beginnings of the Florentine race,
 the descendants of Sulla, noble for all time,
 the Sullan race, settlers of ancient Roman stock,
 never degenerating from their ancestors.
 Ah, the men this earth brought forth, ah, the energy
 that once did lift the Tuscan name up to the stars!
 All of whom great Cosimo overtops as much
 as the dawn's radiance exceeds the lesser stars.
 – Cristoforo Landino, “On the Praises of
 Cosimo the Great” (1458)¹

Machiavelli paints a bleak portrait of modern Italy throughout his major political works. The final chapter of *The Prince*, for example, describes Italy as historically unparalleled in its devastation and suffering, holding that it now stands “more enslaved than the Hebrews, more servile than the Persians, more dispersed than the Athenians, without head, without order, beaten, despoiled, torn, pillaged, and having endured ruin of every sort” (P 26). Plagued by “sores that have festered for some time now,” the region “prays to God to send her someone to redeem her from these barbarous cruelties and insults” and thereby disprove the suspicion, born from the futility of past “revolutions” and “maneuvers of war,” that “military virtue has died out in her” entirely (P 26). Likewise, the *Discourses* opens with the lament that although modern Italians have proven themselves to be capable mimics of classical art, their unwillingness even to

¹ Landino 2008, 197.

attempt the great deeds performed by ancient principalities and republics confirms that “no sign of that ancient virtue remains with us” (D 1.pref.). Whereas nature had once ensured that virtue remained concentrated in a single province of the world – first Assyria, then Media, then Persia, and finally Italy and especially Rome – it has since been “scattered in many nations,” including Germany and the Ottoman Empire, with nothing remaining to Italians “that recompenses them for every extreme misery, infamy, and reproach” they are forced to suffer now that their religion, laws, and military are all “stained by every type of filth” (D 2.pref.). Similarly, the *Histories* describes modern Italians as utterly incapable of building anything truly great on the ruins of Rome. Summarizing why he thinks the study of modern Italian history is valuable despite the fact that “the things done by our princes outside and at home may not be read, as are those of the ancients, with admiration for their virtue and greatness,” Machiavelli explains that “if in describing the things that [have] happened in this devastated world [*guasto mondo*] one does not tell about either the strength of soldiers, or the virtue of a captain, or the love of the citizen for his fatherland,” it is still possible to learn about the “guile and arts” that political leaders have used to maintain themselves amidst such corruption (FH 5.1).

Everyone knows that Machiavelli is unimpressed by the quality of modern politics, especially as compared with the politics of antiquity. But while it is tempting to assume, as many have, that Machiavelli takes modernity to be ‘corrupt’ in some ordinary sense of the term, passages like these show that he believes the corruption of modern politics is truly extraordinary. According to Machiavelli, modern Italy is more enslaved, servile, and dispersed than even the most beleaguered peoples of antiquity; Italians have endured every kind of ruin and their orders are stained with every type of filth; the burdens they have been forced to suffer are extreme; there is no sign of ancient virtue among them, and many observers suspect that ancient virtue has died out completely.²

For Machiavelli, the exceptionality of Italian corruption shows that modern politics has somehow escaped the ordinary, and ordering, processes of history. Machiavelli appears to believe the natural course of

² In addition to highlighting the unprecedented *severity* of Italy’s political afflictions, Machiavelli draws our attention to their exceptional *longevity*: modern Italy, he points out, has been mired in disorder at least since the collapse of the Roman Empire (D 2.2, FH 1.1) – almost three times as long as the Israelites were enslaved to the Egyptians.

history is cyclical, as classical writers like Polybius had once maintained.³ As he himself states in Book 5 of the *Histories*:

Usually provinces go most of the time, in the changes they make, from order to disorder and then pass again from disorder to order, for worldly things are not allowed by nature to stand still. As soon as they reach their ultimate perfection, having no further to rise, they must descend; and similarly, once they have descended and through their disorders arrived at the ultimate depth, since they cannot descend further, of necessity they must rise. Thus they are always descending from good to bad and rising from bad to good. (FH 5.1)

But even here, Machiavelli insists that the natural rhythms of history can be “suffocated by an extraordinary force [*una forza straordinaria*]” that prevents the world from recovering from its “afflictions” as it normally would (FH 5.1). Indeed, calling our attention to the operation of an “extraordinary force” in modern history appears to be the very point of Machiavelli’s discussion of cycles in *Histories* 5.1: while it may be the case that nature dictates regular fluctuations between order and disorder, the extreme and lasting disorders of modern Italy – a thousand years of which Machiavelli has only just narrated, and which he is now poised to show continued under the relatively quiet and stable Medici regime – testify to the existence of a countervailing power, unknown even to the greatest historians of antiquity.⁴

What, then, is this “extraordinary force” that Machiavelli blames for having suppressed nature itself, leaving modernity stranded at the nadir of what used to be a regular cycle? According to many, Machiavelli attributes the political disorders of the modern age to the advent of Christianity. One version of this argument emphasizes his well-known antipathy toward the Catholic Church. In *Discourses* 1.12, for example, Machiavelli scoffs at the commonly held opinion that “the well-being of the cities of Italy arises from the Roman church,” holding instead that it deserves censure for making Italians more cynical and secularized, a condition that

³ For the view that Machiavelli possessed a cyclical view of history indebted to Polybius’s theory of *anakuklosis*, see especially Sasso 1967, ch. 4 and 5; Sasso 1987–1997, ch. 5; Gilbert 1965, 320–321; Parel 1992; Coby 1999, 278–280; and Nederman and Sullivan 2012.

⁴ Cf. Hulliung 1984, 151–167. According to Hulliung, Machiavelli “had within his grasp all the ammunition necessary to explore the view that history was closed and repetitive” and “verged on discovering” its erroneousness when writing the *Florentine Histories* (155). But ultimately, Hulliung maintains, Machiavelli refused to “forge ahead to make this discovery,” preferring instead to “backslid[e] into the position of interpreting the Florentine present as a corruption of ancient virtue” (156).

“brings with it infinite inconveniences and infinite disorders.” Whatever these “infinite inconveniences” and “infinite disorders” may be, Machiavelli distinguishes them from the most significant debt that he believes Italians owe to the Church: the region’s deeply fractured political landscape. “The church has kept and keeps this province divided” (D 1.12), Machiavelli avows, holding that while the church has been strong enough to prevent other states from establishing regional hegemony, it has been too weak to undertake this project for itself.⁵

The cause that Italy is not in the same condition and does not also have one republic or one prince to govern it is *solely the church* For although it has inhabited and held temporal empire there, it has not been so powerful nor of such virtue as to be able to seize the tyranny of Italy and make itself prince of it. On the other hand, it has not been so weak that it has been unable to call in a power to defend it against one that has become too powerful in Italy, for fear of losing dominion over its temporal things. (D 1.12, emphasis added)

Machiavelli attributes the Church’s curious blend of strength and weakness to the fact that its temporal powers are grounded primarily in spiritual authority, not arms, which do not “befit” the pope “as a man of religion.”⁶ Thus, while the papacy has been capable of inflicting grave

⁵ In *Discourses* 1.12, Machiavelli presents a powerful example of the way in which the Church has kept Italy divided by relaying the story of Pope Hadrian I’s reliance on Charlemagne to expel the Longobards, “who were then almost king of all Italy,” having consolidated territories across northern and central Italy under their own king, Desiderius. Desiderius owed his crown to the intervention of Pope Stephen II, who hoped that Desiderius would repay the favor by returning territories that his predecessor, Aistulf, had wrested from papal control. Instead, Desiderius chose to amplify Longobard power even further, at the expense of both the papacy and its Frankish ally, Pepin the Younger. When Charlemagne successfully drove Desiderius from Italy in 774, Stephen’s successor, Hadrian, refused to allow Charlemagne to assert himself as king of Italy in Desiderius’s place, demanding instead that Charlemagne reaffirm several of his father’s territorial donations in a carefully orchestrated public ceremony (Nelson 2005, 29–31). “Thus,” Machiavelli concludes, “since the church has not been powerful enough to be able to seize Italy, nor permitted another to seize it, it has been the cause that [Italy] has not been able to come under one head but has been under many princes and lords, from whom so much disunion and so much weakness have arisen that it has been led to be the prey not only of barbarian powers but whoever assaults it. For this we other Italians have an obligation to the church and not to others” (D 1.12).

⁶ As Machiavelli clearly recognizes, it is incorrect to say that popes did not have or use arms (consider, for example, his references in *The Prince* to the military enterprises of Pope Alexander VI [P 11] and his successor, Pope Julius II, known to his contemporaries as the ‘Warrior Pope’ [P 25]). On arms-bearing by clerics of the Catholic Church, see Bachrach 2003. But Machiavelli also recognizes that because popes relied on the services

“spiritual wounds” on princes who have dared to cross it, excommunicating them from the Church and stripping their political power of its religious sanction (as Pope Gregory VII did to Henry IV when the emperor refused to concede him the right of investiture [FH 1.15]), popes have not been able to overrule princes indifferent to this threat (as was Henry V, who “sent the pope and all his clergy to prison” until they agreed to authorize his coronation and confirm his right to make clerical appointments [FH 1.18]).

But Machiavelli is not just critical of the Church. He also objects to the core tenets of Christianity itself for undermining the exercise of political virtue. Even leaving aside for a moment the inseparability of the defects that Machiavelli associates with the Church and Christian dogma – the reason why arms did not “befit” the popes, after all, was because their use by clergymen was prohibited by canon law – the evidence that Machiavelli considers the moral teachings of Christianity to be infertile soil for the nourishment of political virtue is overwhelming. His indictment of Christian virtues like mercy and faith in the later chapters of *The Prince* are well known.⁷ The *Discourses* turns our attention on Christianity’s emphasis on spiritual purity and heavenly redemption, condemning it for “mak[ing] men less strong” than they had once been by replacing the pagan emphasis on “greatness of spirit, strength of body, and all other things capable of making men very strong” with a radically inverted schedule of values in which “humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human” are treated as the highest goods (D 2.2). Through these devices, Machiavelli argues, Christianity “makes us esteem less the honor of the world” (D 2.2), turning us away from the warlike and acquisitive pursuits that defined what it meant to live an excellent life in ancient civilizations like Rome. Thus, according to Machiavelli, this apolitical – even anti-political – disposition has made the world more susceptible to tyranny: under the influence of a religion that only recognizes strength in a person’s capacity to tolerate suffering, the world has become “prey to criminal men who can manage it securely, seeing that the collectivity of men, so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring their beatings than of avenging them” (D 2.2).⁸

These are serious charges to lay at the doorstep of Christianity, and they have earned Machiavelli a reputation for being among its fiercest

of expensive and unreliable mercenary troops, they could not secure their acquisitions against encroachment by other – albeit similarly armed – states (FH 1.39).

⁷ Orwin 1978. ⁸ Sullivan 1996.

critics in the Western political tradition. Yet the very chapter of the *Discourses* that has provided the most evidence on behalf of the view that Machiavelli blames the pathologies of modern politics on Christianity makes it clear that such a view is not, in fact, his final position on the subject. Machiavelli's reversal in *Discourses* 2.2 is abrupt, but unmistakable. He draws his indictment of Christianity to a close by asserting that it is "[t]hese educations and false interpretations" that have brought it about "that not as many republics are seen in the world as were seen in antiquity; nor, as a consequence, is as much love of freedom seen in peoples as was then," and then turns his gaze toward Rome, as if suddenly reminded by his own musings of another possibility. "Still," he adds, "*I believe the cause of this [change] to be rather that the Roman Empire, with its arms and greatness, eliminated all republics and all civil ways of life*" (D 2.2, emphasis added).

Machiavelli's statement in *Discourses* 2.2 that Roman "arms and greatness" are actually to blame for the degradation of modern Italy is consistent with other statements he makes to this effect in *The Prince*, the *Discourses*, and *Florentine Histories*, including many of the key passages discussed previously. After describing the misery of Italy in chapter 26 of *The Prince*, for example, he notes somewhat cryptically that it "arises from the fact that her ancient orders were not good, and that there has not been anyone who has known how to find new ones." Likewise, Machiavelli argues in *Discourses* 1.49 that Florence's failure to secure a free way of life is a direct result of its having once been a province of the Roman empire, a historical fact that makes liberty an "impossibility" for it. Referring again to the harmful effects of its the "ancient orders," Machiavelli now links them explicitly with Rome:

As one sees in what happened to the city of Florence: having had its beginning subordinate to the Roman Empire, and having always lived under the government of another, it remained abject for a time, without thinking for itself. Then when the opportunity came for taking a breath, it began to make its own orders, which could not have been good, since they were mixed with the ancient that were bad. So it has gone on managing itself, for the two hundred years of true memory that it has without ever having had a state for which it could truly be called a republic. (D 1.49)

Similarly, *Histories* 5.1 attributes the plight of modern Italy to its inability to expiate its history as a subject of Roman power. Explaining that Italy's tormented state is due to the fact that "nothing was built upon the Roman ruins in a way *that might have redeemed Italy from them*"

(FH 5.1, emphasis added), Machiavelli suggests that it has somehow remained in bondage to a dead master.⁹

The peculiar mix of spiritual and political authority that Machiavelli associates with the Church, together with his unabashed hostility toward Christian morality, have to be part of any credible reconstruction of his explanation for the weakness of the modern world. But a complete understanding of Machiavelli's views on this subject must also account for his many pregnant references to Italy's history as an imperial dominion of Rome. Machiavelli develops this line of argument – that the pathologies of modern politics are traceable, ultimately, to Roman imperial rule – in two ways: first, by showing that Roman imperial expansion always involved a deliberate attempt to corrupt or destroy the free peoples of Italy; and second, by alluding to the role played by colonization in the corruption of Rome's own republican orders.

3.1 Rome's Extraordinary Virtue: Fraud

In the space of just 600 years, Rome grew from a small settlement on the banks of the Tiber River to a regional hegemon prepared to expand into Greece, Africa, and Asia Minor. By the first century BCE, it had subdued its fiercely independent neighbors, most notably the Latins, Etruscans, and Samnites; it had repelled a major invasion by Pyrrhus, the king of Epirus and cousin of Alexander the Great; and it had defeated the great Mediterranean empire of Carthage in three major wars. At its height, Rome controlled the entirety of Italy, including Sicily to the south; Spain, Gaul, and Britannia to the west and north; Illyricum, Macedonia, Dacia, and Thrace to the east; Cappadocia, Syria, Judea, Armenia, Mesopotamia, and Assyria in the Near East; and Egypt, Cyrenaica, Numidia, and Mauritania in North Africa – a vast and heterogeneous empire spanning four million square miles and populated by more than 60 million people.¹⁰

Machiavelli attributes these extraordinary achievements to Roman virtue, itself a product of the city's founding institutions (D 1.4) which had empire and glory as their “end” (D 2.9). Taking issue with Livy's position that Rome had benefited mostly from good fortune, Machiavelli insists instead that “if there has never been a republic that has made the

⁹ Machiavelli's language of *redenzione* here and elsewhere has an obvious Christian connotation. But, as with so much of Renaissance Italy's moral and political language, it also has an older Roman meaning: *redenzione* is derived from the Latin word *redemptio*, meaning to ransom or buy out of slavery.

¹⁰ Mattingly 2010, 8.

profits that Rome did, this arose from there never having been a republic that has been ordered so as to be able to acquire as did Rome. For the armies' virtue made them acquire the empire; and the order of proceeding and its own mode found by its first lawgiver made them maintain what was acquired" (D 2.1).¹¹

Rome's "first lawgiver" was Romulus, its warlike founder and first king, who remained closely identified with the city's martial character throughout Roman history. According to popular legend, Romulus was the offspring of the rape of a vestal virgin by Mars, the Roman god of war.¹² His very first innovation was the legion, Rome's basic military unit, which he devised as a way of organizing the band of shepherds who joined him in his effort to depose his uncle Amulius.¹³ Romulus later founded the city of Rome itself, the Roman historian Florus writes, "full of hope that it would prove warlike," after "[b]eing . . . victorious in augury" against his brother, Remus. Having spotted twelve vultures to his brother's six, Romulus read martial glory into this omen: "for the birds, accustomed to blood and prey, seemed to indicate this."¹⁴ One of his first acts was to provide Rome with the organizational basis for military recruitment by dividing the city's population into thirty *curiae* grouped into three tribes.¹⁵ In ordering the city for war, Romulus retained for himself the position of military commander, and it was in this capacity that he initiated what would become the Roman custom of absorbing its defeated neighbors into the Roman *civitas*. Following his death, he was deified as *Quirinus* ('the spear-holding god') in recognition of his formative contribution to Rome's constitution and political identity.¹⁶

Rome retained this military and imperial focus when it finally became a republic in 509 BCE. According to Florus, the Roman people immediately took up arms against their neighbors upon expelling the Tarquin kings, "first to secure their liberty, then to extend their bounds, afterwards in defense of their allies, and finally to win empire and glory."¹⁷ According to Machiavelli, however, Roman history tells a different story: that

¹¹ It should be noted, in fairness to Livy, that he underscores the role played by virtue in producing Roman greatness in the preface and throughout the first decade of *Ab urbe condita*.

¹² Livy 1960, 1.4.2. See also Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1984–1993, 1.77.1–3 and Plutarch, *Romulus* 4.

¹³ Varro 1938, 5.89 and Plutarch, "Life of Romulus," section 13.

¹⁴ Florus 1984, 1.7. ¹⁵ Forsythe 2005, 108–9.

¹⁶ Florus 1984, 1.18; Ovid 1989, 2.477–80 and 3.932–34; Ovid 1916, 14.812–28.

¹⁷ Florus 1984, 3.6.

the Roman Republic was always driven by a desire for imperial acquisition (D 1.5); that its constitution was designed to facilitate projects of imperial expansion, not vice-versa (D 1.6); and that it always cultivated and defended its allies with a view to this self-interested objective (D 2.4). Additionally, Machiavelli associates Roman imperialism more narrowly than Florus with the political ambitions of its elite order, which he portrays throughout the *Discourses* as having employed a combination of political concessions (D 1.6), fraud (D 1.13), and necessity (D 3.12) to secure popular support for its military adventures.

Machiavelli attributes special importance to the effect that Rome's seminal commitment to empire had on its constitutional development as a republic, holding that patricians only conceded major political reforms to the plebeian order because they wanted to retain their services on the battlefield (D 1.6). This is why Machiavelli praises Romulus for having "made many and good laws conforming . . . to a free way of life" in *Discourses* 1.2 even as he admits that Romulus's intention was never to found a republic. By setting the city on a path of imperial expansion, Romulus had unknowingly framed the conditions under which political discords between patricians and plebeians would, over time, prove conducive to the production of free institutions (D 1.4). Machiavelli also suggests that Rome's dedication to war protected it against the corrupting influence of its fertile location, which would have encouraged "idleness" in the Roman population were it not for the manufactured "necessity" of constant imperial expansion, which "constrained" Romans to an industrious lifestyle for many centuries (D 1.1).¹⁸ For these two reasons, Machiavelli sees fit to open Book 1 of the *Discourses* with the statement that "[t]hose who read what the beginning was of the city of Rome and by what legislators and how it was ordered will not marvel that so much virtue was maintained for many centuries in that city" or that "afterward the empire that the republic attained arose there" (D 1.1).

Machiavelli's discussion of Rome's physical environment in Book 1 engages various arguments – made by Livy, Strabo, Varro, Pliny the Elder, and others – to the effect that Roman greatness was facilitated by the region's productivity.¹⁹ While accepting that cities founded in fertile environments enjoy a number of important advantages over those founded in

¹⁸ Machiavelli's approval of the fact that Romans of the early Republic were *poor* has been lost in some of the recent literature on his political economy, which has stressed its egalitarian currents instead (e.g. McCormick 2009).

¹⁹ Garnsey and Seller 1987, 5–6.

sterile areas, Machiavelli points out that fertility also generates its own problems: over time, the abundance offered by fertile sites generates idleness and discord unless it is “restrained within proper limits by laws” (D 1.1). Consequently, he argues, Rome’s success is traceable as much to the ingenuity shown by its founders in deferring these outcomes by drafting laws that imposed “many necessities” on their people, such that “the fertility of the site, the advantages of the sea, the frequent victories, and the greatness of its empire could not corrupt [Rome] for many centuries” (D 1.1).

Machiavelli advances a similar line of argument in Book 2, where he addresses (more implicitly) Strabo’s further claim that Rome benefited from its proximity to numerous peoples whose “services” it could “easily avail itself.”²⁰ Again, Machiavelli recounts the situation differently, stressing how Rome’s geographical position stood as an *obstacle* to its success – until it was finally neutralized by Roman virtue. According to Machiavelli, the fact that Rome was surrounded by myriad free cities, all of whom were “very armed and obstinate in defense of their freedom” (D 2.2), made it impossible for Rome to expand easily; far from cooperating with Roman imperial projects, surrounding cities opposed them. Indeed, it was their open and unflagging *resistance* – not assistance – that forced Rome to cultivate the “rare and extreme virtue” (D 2.2) that ultimately produced its staggering imperial gains. Before Rome could safely turn its attention to the world, it had to subdue its own neighbors first – and given their own power and vitality, Rome itself had to become something extraordinary. Otherwise, Machiavelli reasons, “the Roman people would never have been able to overcome them” (D 2.2).

On this point – that Italy was once home to *many* free peoples – Machiavelli is very clear and insistent. All of Rome’s immediate neighbors, he tells us, were once free peoples, including the Latins, Samnites, Aequi, Volscians, and Etruscans. In fact, he maintains, the entire region of Italy from the Apennines to Calabria were “all free peoples” during this pre-imperial era, with Etruria and Rome itself being the only cities in which kings were ever known to have ruled (D 2.2). Indeed, Machiavelli goes so far as to hold, implausibly, that the entire ancient world was free, claiming that “in those ancient times peoples were more lovers of freedom than in these” and, consequently, that “*in every least part of the world* the Romans found a conspiracy of republics very armed and very obstinate in defense of their freedom” (D 2.2, emphasis added). Unlike the modern

²⁰ Strabo 1917, 286. Cited in Garnsey and Saller 1987, 5.

world, in which “there is only one province that can be said to have free cities in it,” Germany, “in ancient times there were *very many very free peoples in all provinces*” (D 2.2, emphasis added).

Echoing his judgment in the *Prince* that states “accustomed to living by their own laws and in liberty” are particularly difficult to subdue because “the memory of their ancient liberty does not and cannot let them rest” (P 5), the *Discourses* explains that “the love that many peoples in those times had for freedom” made it particularly “laborious” for Rome to defeat them (D 2.2) – hardly the obliging picture of Italy painted by Strabo. This was especially true of Rome’s closest neighbors, the Etruscans and the Samnites, whom Machiavelli describes as having “defended [their liberty] so obstinately that they would never have been subjected if not by an excessive virtue [*eccessiva virtù*]” of the sort that came to mark the Roman people (D 2.2). Indeed, they were “so powerful and their arms so sound” that Rome only managed to pacify them during the consulship of the second Papirius Cursor in 272 BCE, after seventy years of war and innumerable “defeats, ruinings of towns, and . . . slaughters” (D 2.2).

Machiavelli concurs with Strabo only in acknowledging that Rome frequently exploited to its own advantage local rivalries among these neighboring peoples, soliciting the help of one city to defeat another and eventually vanquishing its own allies with the very power they themselves had willingly helped Rome to accumulate.

So its partners came to subjugate themselves by their own labors and blood without perceiving it. For they began to go out of Italy with their armies, to reduce kingdoms to provinces, and to get subjects who did not care about being subjects since they were accustomed to living under kings and who did not acknowledge a superior other than Rome since they had Roman governors and had been conquered by armies with the Roman title. In this mode the partners of Rome who were in Italy found themselves in a stroke encircled by Roman subjects and crushed by a very big city, such as Rome was. (D 2.4)

Key to this tactic was the fact that Rome treated its allies as junior partners, welcoming their support and assistance while keeping for itself the “rank of command, the seat of empire, and the title of enterprises” (D 2.4). By the time Rome’s neighbors recognized “the deception under which they had lived” (D 2.4), Machiavelli says, they were doomed: thanks to their own efforts, Rome had grown so “very big and very armed” (D 2.4) that it could not be repulsed in any mode. In this sense, perhaps, is it fair to say that Rome “availed itself” of its neighbors’ services in building its empire.

3.2 Rome's Extraordinary Virtue: Force

In *Discourses* 2.4, Machiavelli contrasts Roman “deception” favorably with two other ancient modes of empire-building: true confederations and naked conquest. Etruria, he explains, had taken the first course, forming a league of twelve republics “in which none was before another in either authority or rank” (D 2.4). This strategy had made the Etruscan people “very powerful by sea and land,” such that their “arms” were “obeyed” across a broad stretch of land from the Alps to the Tiber River, where they also managed to establish a number of successful colonies, including the city of Adria (D 2.4). But the Etruscan empire could not grow beyond these limits, Machiavelli says, because its decentralized structure made it slow and indecisive, and the fact that honor and profit were shared equally by all made everyone “esteem” acquisition less (D 2.4). Sparta and Athens, by contrast, had expanded by reducing other cities to the position of “direct subjects” (D 2.4). Although this approach was initially very successful for them, Machiavelli admits, it proved to be unsustainable. “For taking care of governing cities by violence, especially those accustomed to living freely, is a difficult and laborious thing,” and neither Athens nor Sparta were sufficiently “massive with arms” to do the job. Because cities that grow in this way are often destroyed when their empires suddenly and inevitably collapse, Machiavelli deems it an “entirely useless” mode of expansion (D 2.4).

Machiavelli characterizes Rome's use of partnerships as an improvement on the Athenian and Spartan approach to conquest. What distinguished Rome had to do with the preparations it made for acquiring subjects via these partnerships: whereas Athens and Sparta had attempted to create and maintain large empires as small cities, Rome absorbed its smaller and less vigorous neighbors into the Roman *civitas* before setting out to defeat its most powerful adversaries. As Machiavelli explains at length in *Discourses* 2.3, a city cannot become “great” without an “abundance of inhabitants.” This is what Sparta and Athens lacked thanks to their conservative approach to citizenship and what made them incapable of sustaining their imperial acquisitions despite the fact that both cities were “very armed and ordered with good laws” (D 2.3).²¹ Rome, by

²¹ As Machiavelli explains in *Discourses* 2.4, since “it is neither possible nor natural for a thin trunk to support a thick branch” whenever a small republic manages to acquire a city bigger than itself “it supports [its conquest] with labor, and every small wind breaks it.”

contrast, extended the rights of citizenship to anyone who wanted it (a policy that Machiavelli calls the “way of love”) and sometimes compelled whole populations to move to Rome whether they wanted to or not (the “way of force” [D 2.4]). Machiavelli draws special attention to this second policy by pausing to compare Rome with a “good cultivator,” who wisely cuts the lower branches of his growing tree in order to thicken its trunk so it might eventually produce and support more fruit (D 2.4).

These policies endowed Rome with the manpower necessary to overwhelm even its fiercest opponents and to maintain control over an empire far bigger than anything its predecessors had managed to build. But what did this Roman style of imperial expansion mean for other Italians? Livy's first decade provides a vivid answer to this question. For example, consider the story that Machiavelli himself recommends for our consideration in *Discourses* 2.4, which opens and closes with a simple quotation from Livy: “Meanwhile Rome grew from the ruin of Alba.”²² Alba Longa was a Latin city located just twelve miles from Rome which was supposed to have been founded by the descendants of Aeneas.²³ It was also head of the Latin League, a federation of thirty Latin settlements clustered to the south of Rome. It had supplied Rome with several kings, including Romulus, who was said to have been descended from Alba's own royal family, as well as many of Rome's original settlers. In what Livy characterizes as a kind of civil war, Alba was defeated in the middle of the seventh century BCE by Roman troops led by its third king, Tullus Hostilius. When it was later suspected of treachery, Alba was completely destroyed and its entire population was moved to Rome. Immediately before the line that Machiavelli quotes in *Discourses* 2.4, Livy movingly recounts the Albans' grief and terror as Roman troops prepared to raze their beloved city:

Soon the Roman cavalymen shouted their orders. It was time to leave, and the harsh command could not be disobeyed. On the outskirts of town was heard the crash of falling masonry; in this direction . . . clouds of rising dust darkened the sky. Alba's hour had come. People hurriedly snatched up what they could of their poor possessions, and the melancholy exodus began; the houses where they had been born and reared, the gods of the hearth, all they held sacred, were left behind forever. The roads were packed with refugees in an unbroken line; pity at the sight of others as wretched as themselves renewed their tears; women – and men too – sobbed aloud as they passed the august temples where armed soldiers stood on guard, for it seemed they were leaving even their gods in captivity.²⁴

²² Livy 1960, 1.30.

²³ Livy 1960 1.1–2.

²⁴ Livy 1960, 1.29.

Following this forced evacuation, Livy reports, the entire city was annihilated. And so it was that “[i]n a single hour, the work of four hundred years lay in utter ruin.”²⁵

The Alban people were resettled on Rome’s Caelian hill, doubling the city’s population and introducing a number of new patrician *gentes*, including the Julii, Servilii, Curiatii, and Quintii.²⁶ Livy goes on to report that many other cities were also ruined in this way, including Politorium, another Latin city, that was left utterly “denuded of its people” after being defeated by Rome under the leadership of Ancus Marcius. In recounting this event, Livy notes that devastation of the sort that was visited on Politorium was a policy “not without precedent” since “former kings had increased the size of Rome by the absorption of conquered people” in this way.²⁷ The Politorians were relocated to the Aventine Hill, together with exiles from Tellenae and Ficana. Over time, Livy tells us, the Albans and Politorians would be joined by tens of thousands of other dispossessed Italians from other Latin settlements, including Caenina, Antemnae, Crustumerium, Medullia, Cameria, Collatia, Apiolae, Corniculum, Ficulea, and Suessa Pometia, as well as Sabines, Veientines, and other Etruscans.²⁸ Machiavelli notes approvingly that Rome could field 80,000 soldiers only 200 years after its founding thanks to these forced immigrations (D 2.3).

To be clear, what Machiavelli calls “the way of force” was a policy deployed primarily by Rome’s earliest kings – not by the Republic, as one might assume given the republican focus of the *Discourses*. As Livy explains, this policy of forced incorporation was gradually abandoned by the city’s three Etruscan kings, Tarquinius Priscus, Servilius Tullius, and Tarquinius Superbus, who began instead to sell defeated populations into slavery.²⁹ Under the Republic, mass enslavement was by far the more common fate for conquered peoples.

Machiavelli is not commonly thought to be an advocate of slavery, and yet he praises the use of mass enslavement as a technique for securely possessing cities that were formerly free in both the *Prince* and the *Discourses*. In the *Prince*, for example, he advises readers that “there is no secure mode to possess [cities that were once free] other than to ruin them” because “whoever becomes patron of a city accustomed to living freely and does not destroy it, should expect to be destroyed by it; for it always has a refuge in rebellion the names of liberty and its ancient

²⁵ Livy 1960, 1.29.

²⁶ Livy 1960, 1.30.

²⁷ Livy 1960, 1.33.

²⁸ Palmer 1970, 132.

²⁹ Palmer 1970, 138.

orders which are never forgotten either through length of time or because of benefits received" (P 5). Although this is language similar to what is found in *Discourses* 2.4, the rest of the chapter makes plain that what Machiavelli means by "ruin" in this context is something different from absorption into the Roman *civitas* in the manner of Alba. "Whatever one does or provides for," he maintains, "unless the inhabitants [of a republic] are *broken up or dispersed*, they will not forget that name and those orders, and will immediately recur to them upon any accident as did Pisa after having been kept in servitude a hundred years by the Florentines" (P 5, emphasis added).

Having offered this maxim, Machiavelli cites approvingly Rome's treatment of Capua, Carthage, Numantia, and Greece without explaining precisely what Rome had done to render their populations "broken up" and "dispersed" – but anyone familiar with Livy knows exactly what he means. As retribution for defecting to Carthage during the Second Punic War, Rome had executed Capua's entire senatorial order; seized its movable wealth, totaling approximately 33,000 pounds of gold and silver; designated its territory *ager publicus*, to be leased exclusively by Roman citizens; and sold its remaining inhabitants into slavery.³⁰ In Rome itself, all that was disputed concerning Capua's fate was whether or not the city should be leveled to the ground. Ultimately, Capua was allowed to stand, with the proviso that "it was to have no political organization, no senate, no people's council, no magistrates; for it was felt that the populace, without any controlling political body or military authority, and sharing no common interest, would be incapable of any combined action."³¹ Livy coldly judges Rome's treatment of the Capuans as "in every respect admirable" because, having been enslaved, "the mass of free citizens was dispersed and had no hope of return," making it impossible for them to exact revenge against Rome. Moreover, by sparing the city's "innocent buildings and city-walls" from her "savagery," Livy adds, Rome could "appear before her allies in the guise of a merciful conqueror" while still appropriating these assets for Roman use.³²

The fates of the other cities and regions mentioned in [Chapter 5](#) of the *Prince* were even more severe. After Carthage was finally defeated in 146 BCE, Polybius reports that it was "utterly exterminated": 50,000 Carthaginians were sold into slavery, its buildings were razed to the ground, and its land was declared *ager publicus*.³³ That same year, the

³⁰ Livy 1965, 26.14–16. ³¹ Livy 1965, 26.16.

³² Livy 1965. ³³ Polybius 1926, 38.1.

wealthy city of Corinth met a similar end. Corinth was sacked by the consul Lucius Mummius as the last act of the Macedonian Wars that Rome had fought, intermittently, for the past seventy years. The men of Corinth were killed and the women and children sold into slavery; only the temple of Apollo was left standing.³⁴ Similarly, when Numantia fell in 133 BCE after a months long siege, just fifty inhabitants were spared for Scipio Aemilianus's triumph. The other survivors were sold into slavery and the city was leveled.³⁵

In *Discourses* 1.26, helpfully entitled "A New Prince Should Make Everything New in a City or Province Taken by Him," Machiavelli links measures designed to leave a people "dispersed" with the consolidation of princely power. In defending the notorious cruelty of Philip II of Macedonia, Machiavelli insists that princes must "make everything . . . anew" if they wish to secure newly acquired territories (D 1.26). In addition to making "new governments with new names, new authorities, [and] new men" and making "the rich poor, [and] the poor rich, as David did when he became king," Machiavelli argues, aspiring princes have to "build new cities . . . take down those built . . . exchange the inhabitants from one place to another; and, in sum, not . . . leave anything untouched . . . so that there is no rank, no order, no state, no wealth there that he who holds it does not know it as from you" (D 1.26). Indeed, of the several "modes" that Philip used to secure himself as the "prince of Greece," Machiavelli singles out for special attention his policy of "transferr[ing] men from province to province as herdsmen transfer their herds" (D 1.26).³⁶ Although he recognizes that such actions are "very cruel" and "enemies to every way of life, not only Christian but human," Machiavelli endorses them nonetheless as a kind of "evil" that must be used by new princes (D 1.26).

Machiavelli's description of Philip II is most likely derived from Book 8 of Justin's epitome of Pompeius Trogus's *Historiae Philippicae*, which describes in vivid detail what Machiavelli glosses as making "everything new." Justin recounts how Philip eagerly lent his support to Thebes and Thessaly against the Spartans, who stood accused of having committed a sacrilege, hoping to exploit to his own advantage longstanding divisions among the Greek city-states. Having brutally subdued the Spartans

³⁴ Cassius Dio 1968, 21.72. ³⁵ Appian 1913, 98.424.

³⁶ The fact that Philip's "herds" were actually enslaved Greeks is made clear throughout Demosthenes's *Philippics*.

using Macedonian forces ornamented by laurel leaves, Philip mercilessly turned his sights toward his own allies (recalling, incidentally, Machiavelli's description of how Rome treated its so-called "partners" after they had exhausted their usefulness). Justin writes that, "as if he was afraid of being surpassed by his opponents in the guilt of sacrilege, [Philip] seized and plundered, like an enemy, cities of which he had just before been captain, which had fought under his auspices, and which had congratulated him and themselves on their victories."³⁷ Selling their women and children into slavery and destroying even their most sacred temples, Philip subdued Thebes and Thessaly so cruelly that many surmised his intervention on their behalf had been motivated less by a desire to avenge sacrilege than a desire to commit it.³⁸ As Philip made his way back to Macedon, Justin continues, he "transplanted people and cities hither and thither, according to his caprice" as "shepherds drive their flocks sometimes into winter, sometimes into summer pastures," inspiring everywhere "a sorrow and sadness" made all the more profound by a fear of openly expressing it.³⁹ When these unfortunate people were not "lamenting . . . their own fate," Justin says, they were regretting having burdened their children with such misery.⁴⁰

Philip's strategy for building "one kingdom and people" by redistributing his Greek subjects was later emulated by his descendent Philip V, who was similarly accused of committing acts of impious cruelty.⁴¹ Polybius notes that although his beneficent policies had once earned him the appellation "the darling of Greece," Philip V had become a very different man later in life, as if the "taste of human blood" and "the slaughter and betrayal of his allies" had made him not "change from a man into a wolf, as in the Arcadian tale cited by Plato" but rather "from a king into a cruel tyrant."⁴² Livy's narration of the debate in the Aetolian League between emissaries from Macedonia, Athens, and Rome at the beginning of the Second Macedonian War reinforces this view of Philip V and, significantly, invites a comparison between Rome with these two Macedonian princes.⁴³

³⁷ Justin 1994, 8.3.

³⁸ Justin 1994, 8.3. According to Justin, Philip was similarly ruthless in his dealings with the Phocians. After being convinced to surrender with promises of leniency, he says, they were "everywhere put to the sword, or made prisoners; children were not left to their parents, nor wives to their husbands, nor the statues of the gods in the temples" (Justin 1994, 8.5).

³⁹ Justin 1994, 8.5. ⁴⁰ Justin 1994, 8.5. ⁴¹ Justin 1994, 8.6.

⁴² Polybius 1926, 8.11 and 8.13. ⁴³ Livy 1976, 31.29.

The Second Macedonian War had begun as a dispute between Acarnania and Athens, and it quickly escalated when Acarnania successfully enlisted Philip's support, prompting Athens to request aid from Rome, which it immediately pledged in the name of Greek freedom (although Livy makes it clear that Rome's true motive was to stop the expansion of Macedonian power in the east). In a speech intended to dissuade the Aetolian League from abandoning their treaty with Macedonia in favor of a new Roman partnership, Livy reports, the Macedonian envoys boldly accused Romans of "unscrupulousness" in their dealings with allies, drawing attention particularly to its betrayal of the Sicilian cities of Messana and Syracuse:

In the first Punic war they went to Sicily, ostensibly to help Messana; in the second, to deliver Syracuse from Carthaginian tyranny and restore her freedom. Now Messana and Syracuse and in fact the whole of Sicily are tributary to them: they have reduced the island to a province in which they exercise absolute power of life and death. You imagine, I suppose, that the Sicilians enjoy the same rights as you, and that as you hold your council at Naupactus under your own laws, presided over by magistrates of your own choice, and with full power of forming alliances or declaring war as you please, so it is with the councils which meet in the cities of Sicily, in Syracuse or Messana or Lilybaeum. No: a Roman governor manages their meetings; it is at his summons that they have to assemble; they see him issuing his edicts from his lofty tribunal like a despot, and surrounded by his lictors; their backs are threatened with the rod, their necks with the axe, and every year they have a different master allotted them. Nor ought they, nor can they wonder at this when they see the cities of Italy, such as Regium, Tarentum and Capua, lying prostrate beneath the same tyranny, to say nothing of those close to Rome out of whose ruin she has grown to greatness.⁴⁴

In this passage, the Macedonian envoys charge Rome with engaging in precisely the "deception" that Machiavelli equates with Roman virtue in *Discourses* 2.4. Turning their attention to the destruction of Capua, which had occurred only a decade before, the envoys go on to remind the League that Capua survives only as a "sepulchre and memorial of the Campanian nation, the people themselves . . . either dead and buried, or else cast forth as exiles." As a "headless and limbless city without a senate, without a plebs, [and] without magistrates," they maintain, Capua stands as an "unnatural portent" of Roman power and evidence of Rome's exceptional "cruelty."⁴⁵

Machiavelli's reference to Philip II's "inhuman cruelty" in *Discourses* 1.26, and specifically Philip's culpability for having "abandoned and

⁴⁴ Livy 1976, 31.29.

⁴⁵ Livy 1976, 31.29.

despoiled very many of his countries,” recalls these unsavory depictions of both Philip V and Rome in Livy's history. Such allusions, disturbing as they might be to some of his readers, are nevertheless consistent with Machiavelli's overall view of Roman imperial virtue, especially as he goes on to describe it in Book 2. One of Machiavelli's intentions in the *Discourses* is to explain Roman imperial success in terms of the strategic and often extreme use of force and fraud. In doing so, he is challenging several old and familiar explanations for Roman power, including arguments advanced by Livy himself to the effect that Rome was a beneficiary of nature or good fortune. The suggestion that Rome was no less tyrannical an imperial power than these Macedonian kings is fully consistent with this endeavor.⁴⁶

Machiavelli sees no reason to minimize or conceal, let alone condemn, the treachery and brutality associated with Roman imperial expansion. As he sees it, such behaviors constituted a prudent response to political necessity and deserve to be praised as such. As a city dedicated from its outset to the acquisition of martial and imperial glory but surrounded by free peoples who were more than capable of defending themselves against these ambitions, Rome had no choice but to ruthlessly eradicate anything that might encourage or support efforts to reinstate a free way of life among its subjects. To its credit, Machiavelli argues, it did so with enormous success.

By “ruining” cities like Capua – by dissolving their magistracies, councils, and assemblies; demolishing their public buildings and spaces; dispersing or eliminating their entire populations – Rome destroyed the material and institutional foundations of their liberty. Even more importantly, it destroyed their ability even to preserve and reproduce a civic identity associated with the *memory* of liberty. All this Machiavelli is prepared to condone in the name of political necessity.⁴⁷ But his appreciation for how Rome's “excessive virtue” advanced the city's own imperial projects does not blind him to the harm it did to everyone else – or how it continued to accomplish precisely what it set out to do even after

⁴⁶ In *Discourses* 2.5, Machiavelli alleges that republics like Rome are more ruthless and destructive toward their subject cities than “Oriental princes” – perhaps another, more oblique, reference to Philip II and V.

⁴⁷ Even in those places where circumstances did not require the use of total devastation, “the power and long duration of the empire” itself proved sufficient to eliminate the memory of earlier regimes and consequently made Romans “secure possessors of them” (P 4).

the Roman Empire was itself a thing of the past.⁴⁸ This is one important aspect of Machiavelli's effort to trace the extraordinary corruption of modern Italy to Rome in the *Discourses*. Let us now turn to another.

3.3 Florence's Roman Origins

Machiavelli's study of Roman imperial policy in the *Discourses* serves two primary purposes. The first is obvious: to educate modern readers in how empires are successfully built and maintained. In this regard, the *Discourses* looks very much like an extension of the *Prince*. Machiavelli's second aim is less obvious, but discernible enough: to show these same readers why their own cities have so far proven unable to do anything great. Despite a pointed reminder that we can learn from history the "harms that peoples and cities receive from servitude" (D 2.2), Machiavelli himself does the work of extracting and laying bare its most important lessons on this most important subject, perhaps in recognition of the fact that we tend to view history from the perspective of its victors (D 2.pref.). What he believes history shows, or can help us to understand, is that modern Italy is only capable of servitude *because the Roman empire made it that way*. As he sees it, modern Italians show little genuine interest in emulating the virtues of ancient Rome because they have been fashioned that way by Rome itself as a necessary part of its imperial program.

That Roman dominion would leave its subjects unable "to put themselves back together or reorder themselves for civil life except in very few places of that empire" a full millennium after its collapse is the most compelling evidence that Machiavelli adduces to show that Roman virtue was indeed "rare and extreme" (D 2.2). But this statement also, and more obviously, deflates pretensions to the effect that modern Italians, and especially modern Florentines, live in well-ordered republics. Civic self-preening of this kind had been alive and well in Florence for more than a century when Machiavelli wrote the *Discourses* thanks to the efforts of early humanists like Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni. In recasting the history of Roman imperialism, Machiavelli invites his readers to think critically about two ways in which humanists had attempted to mobilize history on behalf of this endeavor: first, by asserting that Florence possessed lineal ties with Rome, and especially the Roman Republic; and second, by associating the city somewhat more diffusely with the Etruscan (or 'Tuscan')

⁴⁸ Indeed, it is possible that Machiavelli calls Roman virtue "excessive" precisely because its effects outstripped their usefulness in this way.

civilization, which had dominated the Italian peninsula in the seventh and eighth centuries BCE.

The first strategy had been pioneered by Salutati, who had overturned the medieval commonplace that Florence was founded by Julius Caesar in his *Invectiva* (1403), written in response to the Milanese chancellor Antonio Loschi's attack on the "impudent claim" that Florence had been founded by Romans at all.⁴⁹ Drawing on evidence collected from Salust's *Conspiracy of Catiline* and Cicero's second oration against Catiline, Salutati had concluded that Florence was settled decades earlier than previously thought, by Sulla's veterans in the aftermath of the Social War. The notion that Florence was the offspring of the Roman Republic found a receptive audience in humanist circles, where it served to authenticate the city's republican credentials, and it quickly became a central tenet of humanist historiography. Almost immediately, Salutati's position was enlarged upon by Bruni, one of his closest disciples, who expressly maintained in his *Panegyric to the City of Florence* (c. 1403–4) that "the Florentine race" owed its exceptional virtue to the fact that it "arose from the Roman people."⁵⁰ From this claim, Bruni argued that Florentines were naturally, almost genetically, prepared to attain the virtue and greatness associated with Rome: "if the glory, nobility, virtue, grandeur, and significance of the parents can also make the sons outstanding," he reasoned, then "no people in the entire world can be as worthy of dignity as are the Florentines, for they are born from such parents who surpass by a long way mortals in every sort of glory."⁵¹

While Bruni makes no explicit reference in the *Panegyric* to the claim that Florence had been settled specifically by Sulla's veterans, he opens his *History of Florentine People* (c. 1415–1444) with a clear affirmation of Salutati's position on this issue. Its very first line declares matter-of-factly that "[t]he founders of Florence were Romans sent by Lucius Sulla to Faesulae" ("Faesulae" being a Latinized spelling of "Fiesole").⁵² Indeed, according to Bruni, Sulla's veterans – all "excellent Roman citizens and the toughest of men" – constructed the city of Florence in the image of Rome itself:

Out of nostalgia or love for their old home, the colonizers seem to have consciously imitated Rome in their planning of the city and in the construction of their buildings. They built themselves a capitol and forum, in the same configuration as was found in Rome, and they had baths for public cleanliness and an

⁴⁹ Quoted in Rubinstein 1994, 39. ⁵⁰ Bruni 1978, 149.

⁵¹ Bruni 1978, 150. ⁵² Bruni 2001, 1.1.

area for watching games and spectacles. The temple of Mars was built in the same spirit of emulation, for it was to this god that the Romans, superstitiously, traced their ancestry. They were so eager to affirm their relationship to Rome, in fact, that they liked to copy less important structures as well, even at tremendous expense. They brought water in by aqueduct, which was reasonable in Rome where all the water was chalky, but superfluous in Florence where perfectly pure water springs up in abundance.⁵³

By reconstructing the physical infrastructure of Rome, Brunι suggests, these settlers hoped to reconstruct, and thus revive, the basic parameters of Roman social and political life. Public baths would enable them to wash and socialize as other Romans did; an arena would enable them to entertain themselves as other Romans did; temples would enable them to worship the same gods using the same rituals as other Romans did; and, most importantly, a capitol and forum would enable them to govern themselves as Romans did. Homesick, nostalgic, or loyal, these settlers had attempted to recreate in a new place what they had lost in the old.⁵⁴

This argument about Florence's founding by Sulla would be repeated in a variety of humanist writings into the *quattrocento*, including Poggio Bracciolini's *History of the Florence*. But Brunι's history goes even further, shoring up this effort to portray Florence as a city innately disposed to a republican way of life by also reaffirming its legendary Etruscan roots.

Etruria was an ancient federation of twelve cities concentrated in the region known to us today as Tuscany. At its peak, it controlled a vast empire ranging from the Alps southward along the western coast of Italy into Campania. Its greatest urban centers were located just north of the Tiber and included the thriving cities of Veii, Caere, Tarquinia, Vulci, and Orvieto.⁵⁵ The Etruscan people had always looked on Rome, located only a few miles to the south, with suspicion, and Romulus himself had been forced to repulse an effort by Veii and Fidenae to destroy Rome while the city was still in its infancy.⁵⁶ Notwithstanding the fact that Rome's three last kings were themselves of Etruscan origin, the two civilizations remained at odds into the republican era. Hostilities were especially acute when Tarquinius Superbus fled to his native city of Tarquinii after being exiled from the newly founded republic, but Etruscan fears that Rome might cut off its access to Capua, a leading city of the Campanian league to the south, kept tensions high throughout the fourth and fifth centuries.

⁵³ Brunι 2001, 1.5.

⁵⁴ On Villani's effort to portray early Florence as "a microcosm of its Roman parent body," see Benes 2011, 15–17.

⁵⁵ Bonfante 1986, 53. ⁵⁶ Livy 1960, 1.14–1.15.

A series of wars against Rome saw the defeat and annexation of Veii in 392 BCE after a brutal ten-year siege that ended only when Roman troops under the command of Marcus Furius Camillus tunneled their way into the city's main temple.⁵⁷ Veii's one hundred thousand inhabitants were subsequently killed in what Livy describes as a "terrible slaughter" or enslaved *en masse*, making it one of the first major examples of Rome's displacement of an entire population in order to secure a new imperial acquisition.⁵⁸

Florentines had long considered themselves to have had a special relationship with the Etruscan people and especially the town of Fiesole, a settlement on the northern border of Etruria which overlooked the Arno River from a hilltop site that afforded it easy access to trading routes through the region's mountainous periphery to the north. Conquered by Rome in 283 BCE, Fiesole was later punished by Sulla for having sided with Marius during the Social War by having much of its territory expropriated and redistributed to Roman veterans, forming the basis of Salutati's story about Florence's origins under the Roman Republic. In 59 BCE, Fiesole was again besieged and ultimately destroyed by Julius Caesar's troops in retaliation for having allowed Catiline to establish a base there. By most accounts, Florence was built immediately afterward only a few miles to the southwest and populated by the former inhabitants of Fiesole together with a group of Roman colonists.

Medieval writers had taken these stories as proof that Florentines could trace their ancestry to both Rome *and* Etruria, and the city's Etruscan roots were acknowledged in a variety of medieval sources including Giovanni Villani's *Chronicle* and Dante's *Inferno*.⁵⁹ These writers had taken a very dim view of the Etruscans, however, whom they associated with treachery and tumult, and their portrayal of the Etruscan influence on Florentine society was decidedly negative. Dante, for example, has Benedetto

⁵⁷ Livy 1960, 5.19–5.21.

⁵⁸ Livy's description of the scene is heartrending: "A fearful din arose: yells of triumph, shrieks of terror, wailing of women, and the pitiful crying of children; in an instant of time the defenders were flung from the walls and the town gates reopened; Roman troops came pouring through, or climbed the now defenseless walls; everything was overrun, in every street the battle raged. After terrible slaughter resistance began to slacken, and Camillus gave the order to spare all who were not carrying arms. No more blood was shed, the unarmed began to give themselves up and the Roman troops, with Camillus's leave, dispersed to sack the town. [...] So ended that famous day, of which every hour was spent in the killing of Rome's enemies and the sacking of a wealthy city" (Livy 1960, 5.21). On Rome's enslavement of the Etruscan population of Veii, see Welwei 2000.

⁵⁹ Villani 1901, 1.38; Dante 1996, canto 15.

Latini caution against trusting “that ungrateful and malignant race, / Who in old times came down from Fiesole,” who “still smack of their rough mountain-flint” and “Will for thy good deeds show thee enmity.”⁶⁰ Likewise, Villani attributes Florence’s long history of political division to the unfortunate admixture of Roman and Etruscan blood in its population, and especially the contamination of its “noble” Roman stock with “rude Fiesolans.”⁶¹

However, this negative perception of the Etruscans changed dramatically with the publication of Bruni’s *History*, in which the Etruscan people are credited with having endowed Florence with many of its most important customs and praised for the courage and tenacity they showed in resisting Roman expansion.⁶² As Bruni explains, the Etruscan people possessed “the greatest wealth and power in Italy and the greatest fame in war and peace” before the Roman empire – “such,” he insists, “is the clear message of all the most ancient sources.”⁶³ On the enduring legacy of the Etruscan civilization on the Italian peninsula, Bruni is unambiguous: the names of the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic Seas “bear witness to the power of the Etruscans,” he argues, as do the many towns colonized by the Etruscans which survive today as “a continuing monument to their former power,” most notably Capua.⁶⁴ Indeed, Bruni holds that Etruria provided Rome itself with many of its most ancient and venerable customs, including many of its most familiar political symbols and practices:

The Romans took from the Etruscans the toga pretexta and the phalera; the painted togas and embroidered tunics; the rings of office; the handsome golden chariots used in triumphs; the fasces, the lictors, the trumpets and curule chairs, and all the other insignia of kings and magistrates. The twelve lictors who prepared the way for Roman kings and consuls are also said to be derived from the Etruscans. Since the nation consisted of twelve people, each people sent one attendant to the king.⁶⁵

According to Bruni, the Roman people adopted these customs from Etruria because they “admire[d]” and “had a certain respect for the Etruscans.”⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Quoted in Brucker 1998, 124–5. ⁶¹ Villani 2001, 1.38.

⁶² On this theme, see Cipriani 1980 and Ianziti 2012, 105–8. Cf. Ianziti’s suggestion that the *History* constitutes a “rejection of the traditional Roman link” between modern Florence and antiquity (2007, 259).

⁶³ Bruni 2001, 1.13. ⁶⁴ Bruni 2001, 1.14.

⁶⁵ Bruni 2001, 1.20. ⁶⁶ Bruni 2001, 1.20.

In addition to posing a sweeping challenge to humanist portraits of Rome as a benevolent force in Italian political history, Machiavelli's *Discourses* addresses these arguments regarding the classical political inheritance of Florence. As he so often does, Machiavelli accepts its basic *factual* elements but rejects the *meaning* and *significance* that humanists had assigned to these facts. Waving aside the entire quarrel about precisely *who* settled Florence, Sulla's veterans or the Etruscans or both, he focuses instead on what he takes to be an inescapable conclusion: that Florence was founded as a subject city of an empire. Whether Florence was "built by soldiers of Sulla" or "perchance by inhabitants of the mountains of Fiesole," Machiavelli asserts, it "was built under the Roman Empire" and hence it did not have a "free origin" (D 1.1).⁶⁷

Here, Machiavelli's reference to Sulla makes emphatically clear that his argument is *not* that Florence's origins were unfree because Rome *itself* was no longer free when it settled the city. By Machiavelli's own standards, Rome was still a free republic after the Social War: Julius Caesar, not Sulla, was "the first tyrant of Rome" (D 1.37). Rather, his point is that Florence "had its beginnings subordinate to the Roman Empire" in that it occupied a "servile" position in relation to the Republic. Simply put, it was founded "under the government of others" (D 1.49). Instead of standing as its 'parent' and model of republican government, as others had suggested, Rome, according to Machiavelli, originally stood to Florence as its ruling "prince" (D 1.1).

Now, Salutati and Bruni appear to have the facts on their side in this particular debate. While it is true that many communities across Italy remained partially or fully subject to the unilateral exercise of Roman power even after being annexed, Romans who settled *coloniae* like Florence typically retained full citizenship rights, including voting rights and other protections and entitlements associated with Roman public law.⁶⁸ This makes it difficult to see how Machiavelli can reasonably argue that Florence had "servile" origins.

It is true that, as a practical matter, Roman colonists often found it impossible to *exercise* these rights, making subjection to Roman power the 'effectual truth' of colonization, and perhaps Machiavelli has something like this in mind here. But Machiavelli also knows from his own examination of classical sources that humanist arguments regarding *this*

⁶⁷ Machiavelli straddles this debate by holding that Florence "had its beginning from Fiesole and its growth from colonies" (FH 2.1).

⁶⁸ Jalowicz 1972, 57–65.

colony, Florence, were especially problematic, derived as they were from a very selective and self-serving reading of the relevant texts. Sallust and Cicero, the two writers cited by Salutati in arguing for Florence's republican lineage, had focused their attention primarily on Fiesole's complicity with Catiline in 62 BCE, mentioning its founding by Sulla only in passing. But another leading historian of Rome, Appian, had discussed this event at some length, maintaining that Sulla's sole purpose in founding Fiesole had been to increase his already enormous personal power. Reviewing the measures that Sulla used to consolidate his dominant position in Roman society after defeating Marius in 82 BCE, Appian presents his colonization program as a straightforward exercise in clientelism that functioned hand-in-hand with proscriptions to insulate him (Sulla) against political opposition. "There was much killing, banishment, and confiscation also among those Italians who had obeyed Carbo, or Marius, or Norbanus, or their lieutenants," Appian explains, and when circumstances made it impossible for him to retaliate against specific individuals, "Sulla took vengeance on whole communities . . . punish[ing] some of them by demolishing their citadels, or destroying their walls, or by imposing heavy fines and contributions on them."⁶⁹ It was here, among the ruins of these older cities, that Sulla founded cities like Fiesole:

Among most of them, he placed colonies of his troops in order to hold Italy under garrisons, sequestering their lands and houses and dividing among his soldiers, *whom he thus made true to him during his life and even after his death. As they could not be secure in their own holdings unless all of Sulla's affairs were on a firm foundation, they were his stoutest champions even after he was deceased.*⁷⁰

Notably, this point is also made by Sallust, who attributes Catiline's ability to win support for his cause in places like Fiesole to the corruption instilled by Sulla decades earlier.⁷¹

Despite their much-vaunted scholarly rigor and how energetically they had, allegedly, scoured classical sources for information specifically about Sulla's colonies, humanist writers had somehow overlooked this evidence that Florence had actually originated as a personal fiefdom of Rome's most notorious warlord. To be sure, Appian's argument about

⁶⁹ Appian 1913, I.11. ⁷⁰ Appian 1913, I.11, emphasis added.

⁷¹ Sallust 1963, II, 16, 21, 28, 37, 51. Cicero does not allege that Sulla settled Fiesole for partisan purposes; but he does hold that such benefits had weakened the character of his veterans, who had since degenerated into spendthrifts. Cicero also describes these settlers as having come to possess an unhealthy taste for "proscriptions and dictatorships" (1913–21, 9) – inherited, presumably, from their patron.

the self-aggrandizing intentions behind Sulla's colonization program was fully understood by other readers of the early modern era – particularly those, like James Harrington, who were also careful students of Machiavelli. In *Oceana*, Harrington blames Sulla for laying “the foundation of . . . monarchy” in Rome by distributing conquered lands to his soldiers, musing that “how he [Sulla] came to be *dictator perpetuus*, or other magistrates . . . succeed[ed] him in like power, is no miracle” given his land distributions, which enabled them to build vast clienteles of allies and supporters.⁷² Indeed, Harrington points out, the allotment of these “*milites beneficiarii*,” or benefits given “for life and upon condition of duty or service in war, upon their own charge,” initiated by Sulla, became absolutely central to Roman politics under the emperors, whose “safety” depended not on the approval of the Roman people but the loyalty of these colonists and the Praetorian Guard.⁷³

Machiavelli strongly condemns the distribution of “personal favors” in *Discourses* 3.28, describing these actions as the “beginning of tyranny” in a republic. According to Machiavelli, such “favors,” and the obligations they inevitably entail, transform citizens into “partisans” (see also FH 7.1). As the summary executions of Spurius Cassius (D 3.8), Spurius Maelius (D 3.28), and Manlius Capitolinus (D 1.58, 3.1, 3.8) show, patriicians of the early Roman Republic had not tolerated such behavior among members of their own order – less because they were principled defenders of the rule of law, Machiavelli indicates, than because they recognized it as a maneuver that endangered their collective political standing. But this norm had weakened in the middle and late Republic as military commanders like Marius won senatorial approval for two major land grants, the first to veterans of his African campaigns and the second to veterans of his German campaigns.⁷⁴ Sulla's own colonization program differed from Marius's land distributions primarily in the fact that he undertook it without bothering to consult the Senate.⁷⁵ These policies may be why Machiavelli identifies Marius and Sulla as the first citizens of the Republic who managed to take away its liberty (D 1.28). Certainly, Machiavelli believes these obliging tactics help to explain why both Marius and Sulla could “find soldiers who would follow them against the public good,” a precedent that was later followed by Julius Caesar (D 3.24): it was

⁷² Harrington 1992, 189.

⁷³ Harrington 1992, 189. Note that Harrington portrays military colonies as the more stable basis of imperial power given how often the Praetorian Guard became “liquorish for [the emperor's] blood.”

⁷⁴ Broadhead 2007, 159. ⁷⁵ Broadhead 2007, 159.

their increasingly *personal* control over the distribution of resources like these that enabled victorious military commanders to “win [the army] over to [themselves] and make it partisan to [them],” eventually causing Roman veterans to “forget the Senate” altogether and follow their generals instead (D 3.24).

3.4 The Corruption of Nature

As Machiavelli explains in both the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*, the Roman practice of colonization had originally stood as one of the city’s most advantageous political orders. In addition to serving as garrisons in newly acquired territories (D 2.6), colonies allowed Rome to distribute and redistribute again its population in a way that maximized its overall health and productivity (FH 2.1). But, like so many other Roman orders, colonization was reinvented in the late Republic as a tool for advancing the princely ambitions of Rome’s most powerful men. In a word, it was *corrupted*. Florence itself had been founded as a colony of this latter sort, as a satellite of Roman parties, according to some of the very evidence that humanists had adduced to prove instead that Florence was predisposed to achieve Roman-style liberty and greatness. But humanists had ignored this evidence, presumably because it did not serve their argumentative purposes, and the result was a body of literature in which Rome and Florence both figured as what Machiavelli would later call “imaginary republics” (P 15). In asserting that Florence actually originated as a servile city, Machiavelli punctures these fantasies. What Florence inherited from Rome, he argues, was its nascent corruption. Florence may have been founded in the *architectural* image of the Roman Republic, as Bruni once maintained, but it was also, and more importantly, endowed by its founders with an *imperial culture*, which rendered republican liberty, or any form of political life in which no man “overtops” the rest (as Cristoforo Landino says of Cosimo Medici in the poem that serves as the epigram to this chapter), “almost an impossibility” for them (D 1.49 T).

Nor does Machiavelli believe that Florence’s mythologized Etruscan origins provide any reason to presume that Florentines are somehow naturally suited for republican liberty. Certainly Machiavelli agrees that strong and tough “mountain men,” like the Etruscans of ancient Fiesole, are the ideal population from which to build a republic (D 1.11, 2.5). He also acknowledges the possibility that Etruscans may once have played a leading role in the “conspiracy of republics” that initially opposed the

growth of the Roman Empire, moved by their native “love of freedom” (D 2.2) which they rightly understood to have been endangered by Roman expansion. But Machiavelli sees no justification for inferring from these observations that Florentines were themselves endowed with anything like the same civic spirit or ability. As he starkly reminds his reader, *the Etruscan people were completely obliterated by Rome*. They were killed off, at least culturally, by their Roman conquerors, making it impossible for them to have communicated these political attributes to Florentines.

Machiavelli makes this point forcefully in *Discourses* 2.4 and 2.5, marveling at how little we know about the Etruscans despite their having once been the greatest civilization in all of Italy. Bruni had been right to note that “Tuscany was . . . once powerful” and “full of religion and of virtue,” Machiavelli suggests. But what is most relevant to understanding the character of Florentine politics is the fact that every trace of its former magnificence had been “*eliminated by Roman power*” (D 2.5, emphasis added), gradually consigned to “oblivion” by the thoroughgoing work of imperial destruction. All that is left, Machiavelli reminds us, is the Etruscan name and nothing else (D 2.4, 2.5). Thus, while their “empire” and “power” in Italy was “secure for a great time, with the highest glory of empire and arms and special praise for customs and religion,” Machiavelli explains, Etruscan “power and glory” was ultimately “eliminated by the Romans; and were eliminated so much that although two thousand years ago the power of the Tuscans was great, at present there is almost no memory of it” (D 2.4).

Machiavelli’s insistence that “the memory of [the Etruscan] name” (D 2.5) is all that remains of this proud people does more than just challenge Bruni’s effort “to establish an unbroken line of continuity between Etruscan origins and the present.”⁷⁶ It also pointedly reintroduces unsettling questions about the ‘nature’ of Roman imperial virtue. At first glance, Machiavelli seems to advance the cosmological theory outlined in *Discourses* 2.5 as a way of explaining, and perhaps justifying, the unhappy fate of the Etruscan people. According to this theory, the earth is periodically and “of necessity” cleansed of its accumulated corruption by disasters sent from heaven (D 2.5). Just as “simple bodies” must occasionally purge themselves of their “superfluous matter” for the sake of their “health,” Machiavelli writes, so too must “this mixed body of the human race” (D 2.5). Thus, when “all provinces are filled with inhabitants” and “human astuteness and malignity have gone as far as they can

⁷⁶ Ianziti 2007, 259.

go,” nature helpfully wipes the slate clean by sending a flood, plague, or famine, “so that men, through having become few and beaten, may live more advantageously and become better” (D 2.5).

By introducing and concluding *Discourses* 2.5 with references to their obliteration, Machiavelli seems to be suggesting that the Etruscans were eradicated by such heavenly forces. In fact, however, *Discourses* 2.5 distinguishes quite carefully between the intervention of heaven in worldly affairs and man-made sources of oblivion, like Christianity’s effort to destroy all vestiges of paganism.⁷⁷ While these man-made disasters may be ‘natural’ insofar as they emanate from the innate desires of those who perpetrate them, such disasters are clearly not understood by Machiavelli to be part of the self-regulating processes of nature itself. As Machiavelli uses the example of Christianity to show, these fabricated catastrophes are *not* designed to promote the health or well-being of the human race in its entirety. Rather, they are intended to secure the dominance of a particular “sect” of humanity over its rivals, at any cost (D 2.5). It is this story about “the Variation of Sects and Languages” (D 2.5 T), Machiavelli wagers, that accounts for Rome’s destruction of Etruria, and possibly its effect on the West more generally. Instead of purging the world of its corruption, Rome stripped away its extreme and pervasive *virtue* in order to assert itself as its universal lord.

If anything, Machiavelli’s narrative suggests that Rome somehow managed to obliterate the regenerative power of nature of itself. Although he refers to the possibility that natural disasters can restore the strength and vitality of the human race, it remains a speculative posture. Unlike so much else of what Machiavelli presents to his reader for consideration, he provides no historical evidence to substantiate this particular claim and certainly none to suggest that natural disasters have brought about these positive effects in modernity. Indeed, he must have known that Florentines looking to assess this theory against the measure of their own historical experience would have found it profoundly unsatisfying. Florence had only recently suffered the very three catastrophes named in this chapter: the Arno River had flooded in 1333, a calamity that Villani had identified as the greatest disaster to befall Florence since the city’s destruction at the hands of Attila the Hun; horrific famines had struck Florence in 1328–30 and 1345–47, followed by crop failures in 1370, 1371, 1374, 1379, and 1383; and a full three-quarters of the city’s population had perished

⁷⁷ Interestingly, Machiavelli does not identify Christianity as a cause sent “from heaven” (D 2.5).

during the Black Death of 1348.⁷⁸ But, as Machiavelli himself makes clear, Florence was no better off for having endured these disasters.

3.5 Machiavelli's Modern History

Machiavelli's political thought is sometimes held to rest on pre-modern foundations, including a "naturalistic conception of history" whereby human affairs are explained with reference to the motions of heavenly bodies.⁷⁹ The clearest evidence on behalf of this view is found in *Discourses* 1.2, *Discourses* 2.5, and *Histories* 5.1, where Machiavelli invokes a cyclical understanding of history similar to what one finds in Polybius and other Greek and Roman historians. These excerpts are often taken as proof that Machiavelli regards the basic contours of political life as being, for better or worse, beyond human control; an outlook that is sometimes glossed as a pessimistic or fatalistic view of human affairs.⁸⁰ But Machiavelli's reflections on the far-reaching effects of Roman virtue suggest a distinctly modern understanding of the relationship between nature and history, and even a concept of 'modernity' itself. In place of the classical idea that politics is fundamentally underwritten by nature, which history is powerless to change, Machiavelli presents nature as susceptible to the effects of human action. As Machiavelli sees it, modernity is an 'extraordinary' historical moment in that its politics can no longer be wholly explained or interpreted with the reference to the ordinary, and ordering,

⁷⁸ Villani 1901, 10.29. Villani here confuses Attila and Totila.

⁷⁹ Parel 1992, 153–61. The view that Machiavelli interprets human affairs through the lens of a pre-modern historical consciousness is widespread in the scholarly literature on Machiavelli. References to Machiavelli's cyclical view of history are often made in passim, but see especially Koselleck 2004; Gilbert 1977c; Trompf 1979; Najemy 1982b; Unger 2012; Jacobitti 2000; Hulliung 1984; von Vacano 2007, 27–28; Viroli 1998, 17–21. See also footnote 126. The idea that Machiavelli offers a linear and/or progressive view of history has been defended by Pocock 1975; Mansfield 1998a; Vatter 2000. Paul Rahe recognizes, as I do, that Machiavelli views modernity as a radical deviation from the cycles of political change that held in antiquity; but he attributes this deviation to the influence of Christianity, whereas I trace it to the devastating impact of Roman imperialism (Rahe 2008, 93–5).

⁸⁰ For example, Gilbert 1977c, 152–3. This claim has been used, in turn, to bolster the view that Machiavelli understands the purpose of historical study to be the distillation of its recurrent patterns and motifs, as opposed to the recovery of particular facts or the isolation of transformative events. As Edmund Jacobitti has put it, Machiavelli was "incurably immune" to the idea so prevalent among modern historians like Ranke that historians should be concerned with producing "an accurate and detailed record" of things, preferring instead to follow classical precedent in transforming the material of history into "poetic symbol" (177).

processes of human history assumed in pre-modern forms of historical consciousness. This is what it means to *be* modern, according to Machiavelli, and the *Discourses* reconstructs how ‘modernity’ so understood came to be.⁸¹ According to this story, modernity is the greatest and most lasting product of Roman virtue. In advancing its own imperial ambitions, Rome transformed the West, and especially Italy, into a region incapable of anything but servitude and slavery, and the world largely continues to be what Rome made it even today.

Ultimately, Machiavelli points to this as being Rome’s most extraordinary accomplishment: the relaxation of nature’s authority over human affairs, such that it is no longer possible to say that nature plays a controlling role in the re-emergence of political order in the face of corruption. It may be true, he insists, that human nature itself has remained unchanged since antiquity, making it an “error” to presume (as some of his contemporaries evidently did) that “heaven, sun, elements, [or] men” are different today from what they were in ancient times (D 1.pref.; see also D 1.39, 3.43).⁸² But it is also true that Rome’s imperial policies transformed the proverbial *altera natura* of custom so dramatically across the West that even now classical theories of history are obsolete.⁸³

Machiavelli’s work thus offers us a story about the ability of human beings to make and remake the world in which they live, including themselves as part of that world. Although not as bold or thoroughgoing as the stories that Rousseau or Nietzsche would later tell, Machiavelli’s description of how Rome came to rule the world is still very much about the attenuation of nature’s influence on political life, and even, to some extent, its incorporation into the dominion of man. It is also, metaphysically if not politically, a story about liberty. In explaining how the West came to be so enslaved, Machiavelli describes the liberation of the human race from the once-inexorable laws of history. Indeed, Rome’s “excessive virtue” – the hammer that shattered these bonds – marked that city’s own emancipation from the ordinariness of nature, even as it served what

⁸¹ For other interpretations of Machiavelli’s modernity, see especially Strauss 1958 and 2000, 24; Mansfield 1998a; and Vatter 2000. This reading of Machiavelli dovetails nicely with the idea that Renaissance authors developed, and often struggled with, ideas of historical distance (Burke 1969 and Kelley 1970).

⁸² An example of this sentiment is Francesco Guicciardini’s view that urging Florence to imitate Rome is like asking “an ass to race like a horse” (1994, 173).

⁸³ Machiavelli discusses the variability and persistence of custom most explicitly in *Discourses* 3.43 (“That Men Who Are Born in One Province Observe Almost the Same Nature for All Times”), where custom is defined as a “mode of life” born from a particular “form of education” that varies in ways that human nature itself does not.

Machiavelli elsewhere calls the “natural and ordinary desire to acquire” (P 3).

By depicting modernity in this way, Machiavelli also invites us to think about nature as the raw material for creative action: something we can manipulate, rework, and ultimately overcome through the exercise of political virtue. Rather than memorialize the always familiar patterns of history, Machiavelli positions his readers within an unscripted and open-ended “flow of time” that permits them the possibility of radically altering its course.⁸⁴ Moreover, Machiavelli clears the way for a progressive view of history in which human beings possess the ability to radically alter themselves by reforming their world. But these possibilities stand very far outside Machiavelli's immediate sights, which are trained upon a much darker implication: that we may be forever condemned to the extraordinary and extreme corruption that as yet defines modernity.

⁸⁴ “To be modern means to be ‘new,’ to be an unprecedented event in the flow of time, a first beginning, something different than anything that has come before, a novel way of being in the world, ultimately not even a form of being but a form of becoming. To understand oneself as new is also to understand oneself as self-originating, as free and creative in a radical sense, not merely as determined by a tradition or governed by fate or providence. To be modern is to be self-liberating and self-making, and thus not merely to be *in* a history or tradition but to *make* history. To be modern consequently means not merely to define one's being in terms of time but also to define time in terms of one's being, to understand time as the product of human freedom in interaction with the natural world” (Gillespie 2008, xiii).

The Questionable Virtues of the Medici

It is not histories we are writing but lives. And it is not always the most famous deeds which reveal a man's good or bad qualities: a clearer insight into a man's character is often given by a detail, a word, a joke, than by conflicts where thousands die, or by the greatest of pitched battles, or by the siege of cities.

– Plutarch, “The Life of Alexander the Great”

Machiavelli's feelings about Florence were decidedly mixed, notwithstanding his famous declaration to Francesco Vettori that he loved his country more than his soul. His private letters reveal that he viewed Florence with a blend of disappointment, frustration, regret, and embarrassment – hardly the naïve patriotism that has so often been attributed to him in light of the aforementioned cliché, a product of the War of the Eight Saints in which Florence had squared off against the papacy itself. Even as he repeated it, Machiavelli believed he was about to see Florence ravaged once again; now by the mutinous army of Charles V, which was pressing toward the city on its way to exact revenge against the pope for having thrown his weight behind the League of Cognac. Within a month, imperial troops would lay waste to the Eternal City in a grisly scene that witnesses described as being more repulsive than hell itself. Florence escaped a similar fate by signing a portion of its territory over to Francesco Maria della Rovere, the Duke of Urbino, in exchange for his protection as the commander of the League.

Machiavelli's political writings freely express his disgust with certain aspects of Florentine politics. The *Prince* criticizes the perversity of its softness in handling Pistoia's civil discords (P 17) and the foolishness

of its preference for mercenary troops instead of citizen-soldiers (P 12, 13). Likewise, the *Discourses* firmly rejects Florentine conceits about the city's republican heritage, charging that it has always wavered unsteadily between anarchy and princely rule (D 1.49). The *Histories* offers a similarly bleak assessment of Florentine politics. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), Machiavelli uses it to deflate the easy triumphalism of rival historians like Leonardo Bruni, who had dedicated themselves to memorializing the splendid virtues of the 'Florentine People' in an effort to give scholarly credence to the popular myth that Florence was a new Rome. Putting aside Bruni's self-congratulatory aim of recording for posterity the city's "celebrated exploits in war and peace," Machiavelli writes frankly about how Florentine liberty was regularly sabotaged by the jealousy, cowardice, greed, arrogance, and incompetence of its leading citizens and he regards its failures as illustrative of the "vileness" of Italian politics generally (FH 5.1).

The one bright spot in the *Histories* appears to be the Medici, whose remarkable virtues shine all the more brightly against the book's "grim and gloomy" narrative.¹ Machiavelli paints them in glorious colors: as paragons of moral and political excellence who dedicated themselves to helping others, including the city of Florence itself. Indeed, Books 4–8 of the *Histories* are so replete with glowing descriptions of Giovanni, Cosimo, and Lorenzo that the book sometimes reads more like an encomium to the Medici family than a study of the republic in which they lived. In the Letter Dedicatory, Machiavelli even anticipates that Pope Clement will mistake him for a flatterer. Recalling that he was "particularly charged and commanded by Your Holy Blessedness" to avoid even the appearance of flattery in recounting the deeds of his ancestors, he confesses that "in describing the goodness of Giovanni, the wisdom of Cosimo, the humanity of Piero, and the magnificence and prudence of Lorenzo, it may appear to your Holiness that I have transgressed your commands." Machiavelli excuses himself by insisting that his sources were so "full of praise" for the Medici that he had no choice but to affirm these views in his own work: there was simply no other perspective on the family to consider.

This excuse may have satisfied Clement, but it was hardly true. The Medici had been viciously attacked by many of the city's most prominent writers, and it is impossible that Machiavelli was unaware of the massive anti-Medicean literature that had been produced in the late fifteenth- and

¹ Gilbert 1977c, 139.

early sixteenth- centuries when their popularity was at its nadir. Machiavelli could have followed Giovanni Cavalcanti, for example, in accusing Cosimo of murdering his enemies; or Marco Parenti in reporting that Florentine rejoiced at the news of Cosimo's death in the mistaken belief they had finally been released from bondage to the Medici family; or Alamanno Rinuccini in alleging that Cosimo's grandson Lorenzo was a tyrant who destroyed Florentine liberty. But instead, he pretends that negative views of the Medici did not exist. It is understandable, then, why so many contemporary readers of the *Histories* have questioned the credibility of its portrayal of the Medici, and indeed the reliability of the document as a whole.

In what follows, I argue that Machiavelli's portrait of the Medici family is a serious effort to understand the nature of Medici power and one that recognizes the utility of conventional virtues like liberality, mercy, kindness, and even patriotism in acquiring and maintaining a princely state. The main reason why Machiavelli does not villainize the Medici in the *Histories* is because their actions did not actually fit conventional descriptions of villainy. In Machiavelli's view, this was precisely what made them so dangerous to the republic in which they lived. The Medici built their principality on a reputation for moral and political virtue that set them apart from *grandi* of generations past, who had tried to advance their princely ambitions by openly using a combination of force and fraud. Crucially, the Medici did not just *seem* good: they *were* good, in the sense that they *really did* what good men do. And it was precisely these 'good' actions that constituted the real basis of Medici power. By highlighting the virtuousness of the Medici family, Machiavelli is trying to educate future republicans about the dangers posed by men like these, who have learned how to parlay a reputation for conventionally virtuous behavior into princely power. This is among the most important lessons taught by the *Histories*, and it stands in opposition to Machiavelli's defining claims about princely virtue in the *Prince*.

4.1 Machiavelli's Subversive Use of Humanist Imagery

The *Histories* employs many of the most familiar images of Medici virtue developed by humanist writers of the previous century, and it is fair to say that it uses what had long since become a formulaic language of praise in summarizing the character of men like Giovanni, Cosimo, and Lorenzo. Rehearsing the many "excellent qualities" that made Giovanni di Bicci so beloved by the Florentine people, for example, Machiavelli points

especially to his reputation for being generous, merciful, humble, and wise (FH LD, 4.16). “[N]ot only did he give alms to whoever asked for them,” he states, “but many times he supplied the needs of the poor without being asked.” Giovanni “loved everyone, praised the good, and had compassion for the wicked,” and while “[h]e never asked for honors” he still “had them all” (FH 4.16). Careful to stress his indifference toward the competition for public office that absorbed so many of his fellow citizens, Machiavelli asserts that Giovanni “never went to the palace unless he was called” (FH 4.16). He continues:

He loved peace, he avoided war. He supported men in the adversity and aided in their prosperity. He was averse to public plunder and an improver of the common good. Gracious in his magistracies, he had not great eloquence but very great prudence. (FH 4.16)

Cosimo and Lorenzo are eulogized in similar terms. Cosimo, we are told, “surpassed every other man of his times not only in authority and riches but also liberality and prudence” (FH 7.5). As evidence of the latter, Machiavelli points to the fact that he had managed to lend substantial amounts of money to almost every member of the Florentine nobility, often without ever being asked for it, and had bankrolled the construction of the city’s most impressive churches, alters, chapels, and monasteries (FH 7.5). Like his father, he was “without learning” but he was nevertheless “very eloquent” and “full of natural prudence,” which made him “kindly to friends, merciful to the poor, useful in conversations, cautious in advice, [and] quick in carrying things out,” as well as being “keen and grave” in his “sayings and replies” (FH 7.5). His political acumen was, according to Machiavelli, unparalleled: “No one was equal to him in his understanding of the states of princes and governments” (FH 7.5). Lorenzo is praised, like his grandfather and great-grandfather before him, for his extraordinary liberality, prudence, and patriotic attachment. The most lavish of the Medici in terms of his spending on improvements to the city’s physical infrastructure, Lorenzo is credited with making Florence a stronger and more beautiful place by funding the construction of new streets, buildings, and fortifications (FH 8.36). He is also praised, among other things, for having supported the development of its artistic and literary culture by patronizing writers like Poliziano, Demetrius Chalcondyles, and Pico della Mirandola (FH 8.36).

Humanist writers of the fifteenth century had lauded the Medici family in precisely these terms, as Alison Brown and others have capably demonstrated. Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini, Machiavelli’s

historiographical rivals, had led the way in this regard. Bruni, for example, had used the prefaces to his Latin translations of pseudo-Aristotle's *Oeconomicus* (1420) and Plato's *Letters* (1427) to exalt Cosimo for using his wealth to practice the virtues of generosity, moderation, honesty, benevolence, and justice.² Similarly, Poggio had commended Cosimo's devotion to Florence in his *Letter of Consolation* (1433) and *Letter of Congratulation* (1434), written to Cosimo during and after his exile from the city. According to Poggio, Cosimo's willingness to defend the public good even at great personal cost recalled the unflinching patriotism of classical heroes like Aristides, Camillus, Scipio Africanus, and Cicero.³ This effort to analogize Cosimo and the greatest statesmen of antiquity continued in the many translations of Plutarch's *Lives* produced during this century, including Lapo da Castiglionchio's *Life of Themistocles* (c. 1434–1436) and Antonio Pacini's *Life of Timoleon* (c. 1434) and *Life of Camillus* (c. 1436).⁴ Later, John Argyropoulos would praise Cosimo's wisdom and learning in the prefaces to his widely acclaimed translations of Aristotle of the 1460s and other humanist writers like Niccolò Tignosi, Donato Acciaiuoli, Alammano Runuccini, Bartolomeo Scala, and Marsilio Ficino would reiterate this emphasis on Cosimo's intellectual virtues, apparently inspired by Argyropoulos's lectures at the University of Florence.⁵ Finally, lyric poets like Carlo Marsuppini and Cristoforo Landino would come to associate Cosimo with Maecenas and Augustus, the two greatest patrons of imperial Rome, stressing the regal character of the liberality he showed toward the arts and extolling the *pax et otium* that characterized his rule.⁶

Machiavelli's description of Cosimo moves easily among these three portraits, weaving them together into an attractive image of Florence's most powerful man. In Book 4 of the *Histories*, he gives Cosimo's return from exile in 1434 a classical valence by depicting it as a Roman triumph, reporting that he was greeted by crowds of joyful supporters as *pater patriae* (FH 4.33). He identifies Cosimo as a "lover and exalter of literary men," emphasizing the close relationships he forged with many of the humanists who later glorified him, including Argyropoulos and Ficino. Still elsewhere he highlights Cosimo's kingly persona, noting that while he always comported himself with exceptional modesty within the city limits,

² Brown 1992, 6. ³ Brown 1992, 7. ⁴ Brown 1992, 7–8.

⁵ Brown 1992, 15–22. On the translation, circulation, and reception of Plutarch's *Lives* in Renaissance Florence, see Pade 2007.

⁶ Brown 1992, 22–26.

he built country estates that were fit for kings (FH 7.5) and his “works and actions” always had a kingly air about them (FH 7.5). His description of how Cosimo turned his attention to refurbishing the city’s public spaces, and especially its religious architecture, following his defeat of the Albizzi evokes the extensive building projects that Augustus launched after his victory at the Battle of Actium. Even Machiavelli’s personal expression of gratitude to the Medici in the preface to the *Histories* – they provided Florence with the “shelter” under which it could enjoy a level of safety and quiet unknown to earlier generations, who had lived through what was effectively a prolonged state of civil war – recalls Augustus’s role in personally guaranteeing the credibility of Roman institutions after the fall of the Republic.

The original purpose of this imagery was to legitimate Medici power, and by appropriating it Machiavelli appears to be endorsing the ideological objective of the literature from which it is drawn. Indeed, this is how Machiavelli’s references to the Medici in the *Histories* have often been interpreted. It should be noted, too, that his personal experience of how dangerous it was to cross the Medici makes it all the more reasonable to expect that he tried to please them in the *Histories*, the first significant task they had entrusted to him in the years since they had purged him from his bureaucratic post in the chancery and later imprisoned him on suspicion of conspiracy. As Machiavelli says in the very first letter he wrote after being unexpectedly released from prison in March 1513, he would be more “wary” of Medici power in the future.⁷

And yet a careful examination of the *Histories* suggests that he deploys these images subversively, not to *solidify* his readers’ confidence in the legitimacy of Medici power but rather to *unsettle* it. Consider, for example, Machiavelli’s tendency to invoke different aspects of the humanist portrait of the Medici in quick succession and even simultaneously. His Romanized portrait of Cosimo in FH 4.33 is vague enough to suggest a variety of plausible Roman analogues, including Camillus and Augustus. Both possibilities are consistent with humanist precedent; but Camillus and Augustus were very different men living in very different times – one was a statesman-general of the early Republic, the other the founder of the Principate – and consequently they suggest two very different assessments of Cosimo’s political identity, at exactly that point in Machiavelli’s narrative where questions about the fate of Florentine republicanism are

⁷ N. Machiavelli to F. Vettori, Letter 204 (13 March 1513).

most pressing. Cosimo had gone into exile after being formally charged by the Signoria with scheming to elevate himself above the rank of a private citizen. Is Machiavelli's Romanized depiction of his restoration meant to reassure his audience that Cosimo was, in fact, a heroic defender of republican liberty on the order of Camillus, perhaps against the sinister machinations of the Albizzi faction? Or is it meant to confirm suspicions that he really *did* aspire to make himself prince, like Augustus was, and that he ultimately prevailed in this endeavor?

Machiavelli also gives his use of humanist tropes a subversive character by juxtaposing particular images with passages that undermine their central point. Consider again his use of Roman imagery to describe Cosimo's triumphant return to Florence. Whatever else it might suggest, FH 4.33 unambiguously portrays Cosimo as an exemplar of military virtue. Triumphs were extravagant processions traditionally awarded to Rome's most exalted military leaders to commemorate an exceptionally important victory or conquest. Camillus, for example, won a triumph for driving back the Gallic invasion of 390 BCE, while Augustus celebrated an unprecedented triple triumph following his decisive victories against Mark Antony in Illyria, Actium, and Alexandria. Even leaving aside the obvious absurdity of comparing Cosimo, a banker, with *any* Roman along these particular lines, readers are likely to be puzzled by the fact that Machiavelli uses the very [next chapter](#) to associate Cosimo with the *corruption* of Florentine military orders. Turning now to the example set by another Roman hero, Marcus Porcius Cato, Machiavelli reminds us that Romans traditionally viewed military virtue as something at odds with philosophical activity, which Cosimo famously championed during his rule and which humanists themselves celebrated in their images of him as an Augustus/Maecenas figure and even a Platonic philosopher-king. Explaining that Cato "saw to it that no philosopher could be accepted in Rome" after watching how easily the Greek philosophers Diogenes and Carneades attracted the city's young men (FH 5.1), Machiavelli urges his readers to take a critical view of Florence's more hospitable attitude toward philosophy and specifically Cosimo's leading role in bringing philosophers *into* the city. Given the fact that Cato objected to philosophy in the belief that it would diminish Rome's martial virtue – as Plutarch explains, he "from the beginning took . . . ill" to "the passion for words flowing into the city" because he feared "the youth [would] be diverted that way, and so [would] prefer the glory of speaking well before that of arms and doing well" – Machiavelli's point here is to question the idea that Cosimo exemplified Roman *republican* virtues, including

those at issue in FH 4.33.⁸ Even more seriously, Cato's warning about the "dangerous deceit" (FH 5.1) of philosophy reframes how we think about Cosimo's enthusiasm for promoting philosophical engagement among his fellow citizens: whereas humanists had interpreted it as yet further evidence of his benevolence and generosity, Machiavelli encourages us to view it as evidence of his poor understanding of republican politics – *or*, if we believe that he was really as prudent as humanists claimed, his nefarious political intentions.

This is only a very preliminary assessment of Machiavelli's depiction of the Medici family in the *Histories*, but it suggests that his objectives in writing about them are more complicated, and potentially more critical, than we often believe them to be. At the very least, his use of traditional humanist imagery has a very different *effect* that it was originally intended to have. Instead of confirming a particular vision of who the Medici were and what role they played in Florentine society, it elicits uncertainty and confusion. Machiavelli cultivates a sense of perplexity about the Medici in other ways, too – for example by referring to the Medici as *principi*, a term which can mean either "first citizen" or "prince," and by confessing that he was forced to imitate "those who write about the lives of princes [*le vite de' principi*]" (FH 7.6) in describing the life of Cosimo, a reference to Plutarch *or* Suetonius – and he has already weakened the legitimating power of humanist imagery by associating Florence with a more popular style of republican politics in Books 2 and 3, in which the superior virtues of particular citizens are only minimally relevant to how much power they should have. By disturbing our confidence in traditional images of Medici power, Machiavelli participates in what Alison Brown has called a "stripping bare process" whereby the most familiar emblems of Florentine liberty were repurposed as criticisms of the Medici regime.⁹ But instead of trying to expose the distance between Florentine political ideals and reality, as others had, Machiavelli reproduces the ambiguity that *always* surrounded the Medici and which he viewed as having been essential to their political strategy. His point is to show that Medici power had possessed no unambiguous reality: it had always been, simultaneously, many things, and its fluidity meant that it could never be definitively 'exposed' as something inconsistent with the city's republican aspirations.

⁸ Cato's authoritativeness on the subject of martial virtue is, presumably, beyond dispute: as a *novus homo*, he owed his political standing entirely to his military ability and accomplishments.

⁹ Brown 2000, 194.

The “multivocality” of Medici power has been well-documented by historians attentive to how skillfully they bridged the many competing social orders that made Florence an unstable political terrain upon which to build anything.¹⁰ In drawing our attention to it, Machiavelli is pointing beyond a simple story about the ideological production of authority by the humanist *intelligensia* of the fifteenth century to something else, namely the exploitation of Florence’s available ideological resources by the Medici themselves. While Machiavelli clearly believes that the Medici benefited from the normative and empirical contributions of humanists, who helped to shore up arguments on behalf of their power by refining the grammar of oligarchic republicanism, defending the credibility of its empirical claims, and affirming relevant descriptions of the Medici themselves, he insists the Medici benefited most from their own remarkable ability to inscribe their ambition within conventional standards of legitimacy. The Medici were successful princes because they knew how to acquire political power from within the horizon of moral and political respectability, and this is the story to which we now turn.

4.2 Salvestro’s Innovation

In *Histories* 2.28, Machiavelli defends the use of sortition to distribute magistracies against criticism by Bruni to the effect that it fails to account for inequalities of moral and political virtue. As we noted in [Chapter 2](#), their quarrel about this provision of the Florentine constitution reflects a deeper disagreement about the very *point* of Florentine republicanism: for Bruni, it was primarily an effort to protect Florentine independence against tyranny by foreign princes and to advance the city’s own imperial ambitions; for Machiavelli, by contrast, it was primarily an effort to protect the rule of law against the princely ambitions of Florence’s own *grandi*. But Machiavelli readily admits that sortition was poorly institutionalized with a view to this objective, noting the fact that many Florentines immediately suspected that decisions concerning the eligibility of potential candidates were being controlled by party leaders and identifying the *squittino* as the primary “defect” of the selection process (FH 2.28). His later account of how Cosimo maintained his control over the Florentine government validates these suspicions in more detail. After recalling him from exile, he explains, Medici partisans created “new lists for the lot, removing from the bags their enemies and filling them

¹⁰ Randolph 2002, 109.

with their friends" (FH 5.4) and they remained sufficiently packed with *palleschi* twenty years later that Cosimo could safely use the reinstatement of sortition to discipline his closest supporters without endangering his own position (FH 7.2).

Machiavelli portrays Salvestro Medici, best-known for his role in precipitating the Ciompi Rebellion, as the first member of his family to experiment with this political strategy. The Ciompi Rebellion was a revolt led by Florence's unguilded woolworkers that resulted in a dramatic, although temporary, shift in political power toward the city's lower classes. It followed Salvestro Medici's attempt to reinstate the Ordinances of Justice and repeal the Law of Admonition, a statute authorizing the Parte Guelfa to disqualify citizens from holding public office because their ancestors were Ghibellines, during his tenure as Gonfalonier of Justice in May-June 1378. Machiavelli asserts that Salvestro proposed these reforms in language of Florentine republicanism; that is, "on behalf of the *popolani*, merchants, and guildsmen of Florence, and the poor and weak who desire to live in peace from their labor and possessions," alleging they were being unjustly excluded from office-holding by the Parte Guelfa. When his efforts were blocked by the Twelve Good Men, Salvestro resigned his office before the city's popular legislative council, inciting a series of riots in which Parte leaders were threatened, houses were destroyed, prisons were opened, monasteries were ransacked, and stores were looted and burned.

The Ciompi Rebellion and its aftermath stood among the most traumatic events in Florentine memory throughout the Renaissance, playing a significant role in diminishing support for popular reforms well into the next century. Bruni's narration of the event in the *History* is, predictably, uncompromising in its criticism of the city's "plebs," who are described as having been motivated by nothing more than a poisonous brew of greed, envy, malice, and brutality.¹¹ "Their only goal" in rioting, Bruni insists, "was plunder, slaughter, and the exile of citizens."¹² But Salvestro is treated more forgivingly, accused of the lesser crime of political naiveté and held up to readers as "an eternal example and warning for the city's leading citizens that they should not allow civil unrest and armed force to come down to the whims of the mob."¹³ Insisting – quite implausibly, as we will see – that "[e]veryone admitted that the Law of Admonition was destructive and hateful," Bruni chides Salvestro for resorting to demagoguery to get it repealed. Salvestro managed to inflame popular

¹¹ Bruni 2001, 9.6.

¹² Bruni 2001, 9.6.

¹³ Bruni 2001, 9.6.

indignation on the issue, as he had hoped; but then “*without him believing it would happen or planning it to happen*, the poor, the workers and men of the lowest condition made themselves lords of the city.”¹⁴ And thus,

while intending to succor a few men who had been ‘warned’ [i.e. blocked from office-holding by the Parte Guelfa], he despoiled of its social position his own family and all others like it, subjecting it to the uncontrollable willfulness of the impoverished criminals who took up arms, raging with desire for the fortunes of rich and honorable men.

Bruni’s point here is absolutely clear, that *grandi* should never allow their personal ambition to endanger their collective monopoly on political power. More interesting still is how strenuously he denies that Salvestro actually *intended* to foment the rebellion, as enemies of the Medici continued to maintain even as Bruni wrote the book.

Machiavelli could have alluded to these rumors in writing about Salvestro’s involvement in the rebellion. Certainly, that would have been the easiest way to besmirch the Medici family’s reputation for virtuousness in the *Histories* if doing so had been his actual intention in writing it. Instead, he adopts something that initially seems to be very much like Bruni’s view of the event, maintaining that Salvestro’s “intention” in proposing his reforms had been to “put the city at rest” (FH 3.10). Also like Bruni, he scolds Salvestro for overestimating his control over the situation, drawing from his example the lesson that “[n]o one should make a change in a city believing that he can stop it at his convenience or regulate it in his mode” (FH 3.10). At first glance, these parallels suggest that Machiavelli shares Bruni’s desire to shield the Medici from criticism – an understandable overlap given their close ties to the family. But a careful reading of the story he tells about Salvestro’s actual political intentions suggests otherwise: that Machiavelli’s real objective is to illuminate the development of a political technique that was ultimately more damaging to republican liberty than even Salvestro’s accidental rebellion.

Before we consider in more detail Machiavelli’s account of the events leading up to the rebellion, it should be noted that Bruni’s *History* refers only vaguely to the political circumstances that surrounded it. While he loosely associates the outbreak of violence with misuse of the Law of Admonition, Bruni’s prejudgment that the rebellion was ultimately an irrational and unjustified expression of popular malice deters him from

¹⁴ Bruni 2001, 9.6. Emphasis added.

devoting much attention to other possible causes. What he does say is that the Law of Admonition was being abused by the captains of the Parte Guelfa on behalf of Florentines who were, for various reasons, dissatisfied by the city's ongoing war against the papacy. Some were *ottimati* who resented the fact that popular men controlled the Eight of War, the executive council responsible for directing the campaign, who nevertheless enjoyed strong support among the city's lower classes. Others were *popolani* unhappy with Florence's estrangement from the pope, the city's traditional ally. Together, they attempted to weaken the Eight by using their influence over Parte captains to have members of the pro-war faction 'admonished,' or declared ineligible for public office. Bruni reports, somewhat cryptically, that "[n]either moderation nor restraint was shown in these activities, and they spread to affect the deserving and the undeserving alike."¹⁵

Machiavelli, by contrast, offers a detailed account of the political maneuvering that preceded the Ciompi Rebellion. It unfolds against the narrative backdrop of Book 2, which recounts the early history of the Florentine Republic and concludes with a harrowing description of how the city's magnate order was finally brought to heel by communal forces in the 1340s. His narrative goals in these chapters are two-fold: first, to show that magnate resistance to the republican constitution was typically *violent*; and second, to show that it was a complete *failure*. In a desperate last attempt to overthrow the government that had been formed to subdue them, magnates had launched a rebellion in the wake of an abortive coup by Andrea Strozzi. Strozzi, an extremely wealthy man, had attempted to "take over the freedom of the city" by selling wheat at reduced prices during a famine, assembling a clientele of more than 4,000 armed supporters who followed him to the Palazzo Vecchio, where he "asked that the palace be opened to him" (FH 2.40).¹⁶ Although the Signoria managed to disperse the crowd with "threats and arms" of its own, Strozzi's move "gave hope to the *grandi* that they could compel the *popolo*" into submission, especially now that a rift had opened up between its middle and lower ranks:

So as not to lose this opportunity, they decided to arm themselves with every sort of help so as to regain by force . . . that which had been unjustly taken from them by force. And they grew so confident of victory that they openly provided themselves with arms, fortified their houses, [and] sent to friends as far away as Lombardy for help. (FH 2.40)

¹⁵ Bruni 2001, 9.2.

¹⁶ Compare with Machiavelli's description of Spurius Maelius in D 3.28.

Led by the Cavicciulli, Pazzi, Donati, Cavalcanti, Nerli, Frescobaldi, Mannegli, Rossi, and Bardi, they had gathered in the streets outside their family compounds and along the city's key bridges while the people assembled under the banners of their local militia companies, which had been organized for this very purpose. Machiavelli narrates the battle that followed in vivid detail: the offensive launched against the Cavicciulli, who defended themselves using crossbows and rocks dropped from their towers until they were finally "overwhelmed" by popular forces; the struggle to retake the city's bridges, which *grandi* had barricaded and defended with "very fierce men" who only abandoned their posts when the *popolo* broke through the Nerli ranks and surrounded them; and the stubbornness of the Bardi, who refused to surrender even in the face of insurmountable odds because they would "rather fight and either die or see their houses burned and sacked than voluntarily submit themselves to the will of their enemies" (FH 2.41). When they were finally defeated, these *grandi* were made to suffer for their defiance. As the Bardi had predicted, they watched as their houses were looted and destroyed (FH 2.42) and the entire magnate order was penalized so harshly that it "never again dared to take up arms against the people" (FH 2.42).

Machiavelli's discussion of the Law of Admonition in the early chapters of Book 3 demonstrates, before anything else, that Florence had not solved the problem of princely ambition by "ruin[ing]" this particular group of *grandi* (FH 2.42). Although the *popolo* had successfully "reduced" the city to a state of "wonderful equality" by destroying its magnate order (FH 3.1), leaving everyone satisfied that "no cause of scandal" remained to disturb it (FH 3.2), Florence was convulsed almost immediately by rivalries among the leading families of the *popolo* itself. Machiavelli points specifically to competition between the Albizzi and Ricci, who, although technically "popular" families, were nevertheless consumed by a desire to "crush" one another "so as to obtain the principality in the republic [*per ottenere il principato nella repubblica*]" (FH 3.2). Thus Florence was divided again into rival camps, just as it had been when the Buondelmonti had fought the Uberti and the Donati had fought the Cerchi (FH 3.2). But the disastrous fate of the magnates had taught the Albizzi and Ricci *something*: namely that ambitious *grandi* could not hope to oppose the collective strength of the Florentine people. If they wanted to obtain a principality, they would need to acquire it from *within* the parameters of the city's republican constitution not *against* it. And this was how the Albizzi and Ricci approached the Law of

Admonition: as a *legitimate* tool for creating and defending what would be, effectively, a principality.

The first move was made by Ugucione Ricci, who helped to revive the city's Law of Admonition with the expectation that it would be used to disqualify the Albizzi, who were rumored to be the descendants of Ghibellines in Arezzo (FH 3.3). But to Ugucione's surprise, it was also endorsed by the leader of the Albizzi faction, Piero, who wished to avoid the suspicion that opposing it would inevitably arouse. So it was, we are told, that the Law of Admonition was "renewed through the ambition of these men" (FH 3.3). Machiavelli goes on to explain that Piero, who already enjoyed considerable support within the Parte Guelfa, became even *more* popular by supporting its passage, with the remarkable consequence that what "had been found by his enemies to impede him was the way to his greatness" (FH 3.3). Having thus "made himself prince of this new order," Piero used his influence within the Parte to ensure that admonishments could only be issued by its captains, thereby stripping the Ricci of whatever advantage they had hoped to gain by remaking the Law and acquiring for himself considerable new powers (FH 3.3).

Ugucione now pushed to reform the Parte Guelfa, urging the city to increase the number of captains from six to nine and, crucially, to require that two of these new positions be reserved for lower guildsmen. It might have appeared to some that his motivation in advocating this reform was an honorable one – a sense of equity or generosity or fairness, perhaps. But his real expectation was that lower guildsmen could be relied upon to oppose the Albizzi because their leader, Piero, was allied with two detested magnates, Lapo da Castiglionchio and Carlo Strozzi. As insurance, he also proposed that any decision reached by party captains be subject to approval by a council of twenty-four Guelfs before going into effect, in the hope that it would further dilute Albizzi influence. Machiavelli reports that Ugucione's new law diminished Albizzi influence only briefly, until Piero had collected a sufficient number of partisans with the Parte Guelfa that "with . . . new reforms made in the party they ordered things so that they could dispose the captains and the twenty-four citizens to suit themselves," at which point the Albizzi resumed admonishing their enemies "with more boldness than before" (FH 3.4).

At this point, Machiavelli inserts a long speech by an anonymous citizen to the Signoria condemning "the love of party and the power of parties" so evident in the legal maneuvering of the Ricci and Albizzi (FH 3.5).

Although the speaker has much to say about the enabling vices of his fellow citizens and the tragic dilemma faced by truly good men, who have no choice but to affiliate themselves with parties if they want to be defended against the avarice and ambition of others, he argues that the “most pernicious” aspect of Florentine politics was “how the promoters and princes of parties” were giving “decent appearances to their intention” by concealing their partisanship with a “pious word” (FH 3.5). He continues with a brilliant summary of what is clearly Machiavelli’s own perspective on the situation,

for always, although they are all enemies of freedom, they oppress it under the color of defending the state either of the best or of the people. For the prize they desire to gain by victory is not the glory of having liberated the city but the satisfaction of having overcome others and of having usurped [the] principality of the city. (FH 3.5)

Begging the Signoria to recognize that it was a “mistaken . . . opinion” and “false . . . judgment” of earlier republicans that Florence could simply rid itself of men characterized by this desire, and that instead of eliminating “the pride and ambition of the great” it had merely transferred it to “our men of the people,” he pleads for it to put an end to the city’s turmoil by “annulling the orders that nourish sects” and “adopting those that do in truth conform to a free and civil way of life” (FH 3.5).

Unfortunately, however – for us, and for the Signoria – the speaker does not actually *identify* what these good and bad orders might be. And since “men are more apt to preserve a good order than to know how to find one for themselves,” the Signoria’s response was predictably disappointing: it focused solely on “eliminat[ing] the present sects,” using the same technique as it always had, political disqualification (FH 3.6). Leading members of the Albizzi and Ricci factions were prohibited from holding public office; but nothing was done to address Albizzi control over the Parte Guelfa, with the result that “if at first [Piero] and those who followed him were hot for admonishing,” after they barred from the city’s magistracies “they became very hot” for it (FH 3.6).

In time, the Albizzi sect became so powerful and the number of admonished Ricci partisans became so large that the Albizzi decided to try ejecting the Ricci from the city entirely “in imitation of the ancient Guelfs, who had lived securely in the city only by having driven all their adversaries from it” (FH 3.8). This is where (finally!) we are introduced to Salvestro Medici. Machiavelli informs us that Salvestro was affiliated with the Ricci party (FH 3.8) and, furthermore, that the Albizzi had attempted to

block his selection as Gonfalonier because, as someone “opposed to their sect,” he would almost certainly use the office to diminish their power (FH 3.9). But their scheme to have Salvestro disqualified was thwarted by his allies on the Eight – recall Bruni’s vague references to a division between those who were ‘with’ the Eight and those who were ‘against’ them – and he was drawn for the city’s highest executive office in April 1378. Like Bruni, Machiavelli describes Salvestro as a sincere defender of popular interests, explaining that he immediately proposed renewing the Ordinances of Justice and repealing the Law of Admonition because he “could not bear that the people should be oppressed by a few powerful men (FH 3.9). But this description of Salvestro’s intentions stands uncomfortably alongside the observation – that Bruni does not make, but Machiavelli does – that he advanced these proposals only after *plotting in secret* with Benedetto Alberti, Tommaso Strozzi, and Giorgio Scali, three of the city’s most powerful men. Indeed, the overall effect of Machiavelli’s re-contextualization of Salvestro’s political intervention is to recast it as a partisan maneuver in an ongoing war between the city’s leading factions, and specifically an effort by the Ricci to pre-empt an Albizzi offensive against it.

This is a completely different story about Salvestro Medici’s political significance than Bruni tells, and one that reflects Machiavelli’s preoccupation with how Florence tried and failed to defeat the princely ambitions of its *grandi*. Bruni does not attempt to deny that Florence was divided when Salvestro assumed the office of Gonfaloniere; but he avoids characterizing these divisions in terms of partisanship, making no reference whatsoever to the Albizzi or the Ricci families, and he treats these divisions as incidental to Salvestro’s own decision-making as Gonfaloniere. Machiavelli, by contrast, *deeply* embeds Salvestro in a story about partisan conflict, which he takes to be essential for understanding Florentine politics and specifically the rise of the Medici.

When Machiavelli complains in the book’s preface that he was forced to abandon his original plan to begin in 1434 because existing histories of the city had given inadequate attention to its civil discords, this is one very important example of what he means: that we cannot understand how Cosimo Medici made himself the prince of Florence, the watershed event of 1434, without understanding how the city’s feuding parties became effective vehicles of princely ambition in the face of republican efforts to enforce the rule of law. His own story about the struggle between the Albizzi and Ricci is meant to repair this defect, by exposing the fact that public institutions were largely under the control of ‘party men’ as early

as the 1370s and by marking the beginning of efforts by *grandi* themselves to give a “decent appearance” to their indecent desire for power.

4.3 Giovanni’s Friends and Neighbors

Even in Machiavelli’s more detailed account of the partisan maneuvering leading up to the Ciompi Rebellion, Salvestro Medici is given only a supporting role: most of the drama is associated with party bosses like Uguccione Ricci and Piero Albizzi. Nevertheless, Salvestro’s actions would prove to be decisive in setting Florence on a path toward oligarchic rule. According to Machiavelli, it was *his* protestation of Albizzi obstructionism that sparked the rebellion that followed; and it was the loathsomeness of the popular regime established in the wake of the rebellion which eventually generated enough support for the Albizzi faction that it could dominate Florentine politics for fifty years after the conservative retrenchment of 1382.

This was certainly not the outcome that Salvestro had *intended* to bring about by attempting to repeal the Law of Admonition and protesting Albizzi obstructionism before the popular council, and Machiavelli even absolves him of the charge that he had intended to precipitate the rebellion itself (although he also pointedly denies that Salvestro’s true motives in resigning his office were as respectable as he publicly claimed they were [FH 3.10]).¹⁷ If anything, he depicts Salvestro as an echo of his ham-fisted mentor, Uguccione: extremely ambitious, but too careless and imprudent to capably “regulate” the city’s affairs “in his mode” (FH 3.10). For example, we learn that Salvestro was exploited by the revolutionaries for their own purposes in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion (FH 3.14) and then summarily abandoned when he was no longer useful to them (FH 3.17). After that, we hear nothing more about him until it is finally noted, in passing, that he had died (FH 3.25).

When Machiavelli later introduces us to Giovanni di Bicci, the next member of the Medici family to appear in the *Histories*, he remarks that

¹⁷ In his speech before the popular council, Salvestro claimed that he was resigning his office because “the way to doing good had been taken from him” by the obstructionism of Albizzi partisans on the Twelve (FH 3.9). Machiavelli himself says that Salvestro made the speech after realizing that “the *first* ways of getting [his reforms] enacted were cut off to him” (FH 3.9, emphasis added), clearly implying that what Salvestro was *really* doing was trying to pressure the Twelve into passing his reforms by provoking popular outrage against them – hence the lesson that it is foolish to believe that one can effectively manage such “humors” to one’s advantage once they have been “set in motion” (FH 3.10).

one of his rivals, Niccolò da Uzzano, “recognized in [him] many parts superior to those of Messer Salvestro” (FH 4.3). Although the immediate context of Uzzano’s warning does little to illuminate what he actually meant by it, what Machiavelli goes on to show is that Giovanni was “superior” to Salvestro mainly in his *prudence*. While Salvestro had recognized the *utility* of marshalling widespread popular support behind his political agenda, and he had even managed to *garner* that support by describing his policies using the language of moral and political virtue (i.e. as a charitable effort to protect the weak against the strong), he had failed to *maintain* it. And why did he fail to maintain it? Because he had made no prior effort to build a *reputation* for himself as a trustworthy steward of the public interest. As Machiavelli explains, what had begun as a popular attack on the Albizzi faction evolved into a broader assault on elite privilege as such when “the lowest plebs of the city” began fear they would be punished for crimes they had perpetrated during the initial tumults. Instead of trusting that Salvestro would protect them against retribution for what they had done at his prompting, they assumed “they would be abandoned by those who had incited them to do evil” (FH 3.12). This was what “always happen[ed] to them,” they reasoned, and Salvestro had given them no reason to expect otherwise from him (FH 3.12). So, instead of delivering the government into the hands of the Ricci faction, they decided to seize it for themselves.

Giovanni, by contrast, spent his entire life cultivating a trustworthy network of supporters who could be relied upon to defend his family’s interests, and crucial to that effort were his own demonstrations of trustworthiness. Unlike Salvestro, who had done nothing to prove to his supporters that he was a reliable ally in the face of mutual risk, Giovanni made a point of establishing his trustworthiness by remaining loyal to his supporters even at considerable personal cost. For example, when he was invited by Rinaldo Albizzi to join his faction’s effort to “restore the state to the *grandi*” by dramatically restricting the number of lower guildsmen eligible for public office (FH 4.9), Giovanni refused, reminding the Albizzi of how dangerous it is to injure and offend the people, a lesson that both parties should have been taught by the Ciompi Rebellion (FH 4.10). Machiavelli makes no effort to pretend that Giovanni’s “goodness” (as he calls it in the book’s preface) was politically unmotivated – having urged Rinaldo to “think more maturely about things,” he recommends using price reductions on salt and tax relief to earn the compliance of the lesser guildsmen instead (FH 4.10) – and he openly acknowledges that it had the effect of increasing Giovanni’s “reputation” throughout city (FH 4.11),

something that his most astute opponent, Uzzano, had already flagged as being his most politically “dangerous” quality (FH 4.3).

Among the Medici of his generation, Giovanni was noteworthy for his political visibility. While the Medici had once been respected members of the Florentine *popolo* thanks to their long history of communal office-holding and their (at that time) modest success in banking, they had since developed a taste for the aristocratic bearing of their neighbors, including the bullying and belligerency targeted by the Ordinances of Justice, and this had diminished their eligibility for public office in the mid-fourteenth century.¹⁸ The situation worsened for the Medici as they became more deeply entangled in the party politics of the next several decades. Salvestro, for example, had been exiled to Modena for ten years following the Albizzi victory of 1382. Other Medici kinsmen were implicated in a series of reckless and ineffectual conspiracies against the Albizzi regime in the 1390s, leading to the admonishment of their particular family lines, and virtually the entire clan was prohibited from office-holding when yet another plot was discovered in 1400. The only exceptions to this ban were the three remaining Medici bankers, Vieri di Cambio and his nephews Francesco and Giovanni, who had preferred to focus their attention on the family business. Giovanni was drawn for the Signoria in 1402, 1408, and 1411 and, finally, Gonfaloniere in 1421, making him the first Medici to hold that rank in the more than forty years since Salvestro’s disastrous term.

Giovanni’s apparent lack of interest in the political rivalries of his time was, paradoxically, key to his recuperation of the Medici family’s political fortunes, and Machiavelli’s comment that “[h]e never went into the palace unless he was called” (FH 4.16) in his synoptic assessment of Giovanni’s character is meant to acknowledge this particular quality. His story about Giovanni’s refusal to participate in Rinaldo’s scheme also illustrates his tendency to avoid engaging in openly partisan activity. But it also clearly reveals that Giovanni’s inaction *was itself a form of partisan activity* – although, crucially, one that could not easily be *described* as ‘partisan,’ and therefore could not easily be used to substantiate an *accusation* of partisanship. Accordingly, Machiavelli is careful to note that Giovanni made every attempt to discourage Florentines from attributing partisan

¹⁸ Their “excessive predilection for street brawling,” as Gene Brucker has delicately put it, led to a number of Medici prosecutions under the Ordinances for crimes ranging from assault to murder, with a total of five Medici being convicted of capital crimes in less than twenty years – more than any other *popolano* family (Brucker 1957, 12–14).

significance to his rejection of Rinaldo's invitation, writing that "in all his speech [afterwards] he gave everyone to understand that he was not for nourishing sects but for eliminating them and that, *whatever anyone was expecting from him*, he sought nothing but union in the city" (FH 4.11, emphasis added).

Machiavelli undercuts this effort by Giovanni to disclaim wrongful political intentions: not just by revealing the details of his private exchange with the Albizzi, in which he freely gives Rinaldo advice concerning how to more effectively diminish the political influence of the lesser guildsmen instead of condemning the enterprise on principle, but also by associating this exact language with the princely ambitions of the book's most obviously villainous character in Book 2. In asking for the Signoria to give him "free lordship" over the city, Walter of Brienne had (disingenuously) insisted that "it was not his intention to take freedom away from the city but to restore it; for only disunited cities were enslaved and united ones free. And if Florence, by his ordering, should rid itself of sects, ambition, and enmities, he would be giving it liberty, not taking it away" (FH 2.35), a claim that directly anticipates Giovanni's reassurances. In any case, Giovanni's attempt to pose as a non-partisan in the context of this issue was a failure because, as Machiavelli explains, "the [Medici] party was already exposed" and "the city was openly divided" between Medici and Albizzi partisans (FH 4.11).

Machiavelli reports that at the same time as Giovanni was publicly disclaiming any sort of partisan ambition, he was being heavily criticized by his own family members for not moving aggressively against the Albizzi now that they had become "hated" by so many other citizens.

Among these was Alammano de' Medici, who was fierce by nature and did not cease inciting him to persecute his enemies and favor his friends, condemning him for his coldness and for his mode of proceeding slowly, which, he said, was the cause of his enemies' dealing against him without respect. These dealings would one day have their effect in the ruin of his house and friends. (FH 4.11)

Machiavelli later adds that Giovanni's own son, Cosimo, was "[i]nspiring him also in the same way" (FH 4.11). But Giovanni still refused to act, not because he disagreed with his family's wish to see the Albizzi ruined but because something had been "revealed or predicted to him" about the likely effects of taking forceful action (FH 4.11). Machiavelli does not specify exactly what Giovanni foresaw, but the narrative suggests that he had learned from the Albizzi example that force was an ineffective way of building a principality in a city like Florence. By attempting to

wrest power from the city's lesser guildsmen, the Albizzi had earned their "hatred" (FH 4.11) and this had ruined them. This made Giovanni reluctant to do anything that suggested he was willing to use force in acquiring and maintaining power for himself, even now when it was clear that he could have done so with widespread public support.¹⁹ Instead, he continued on his slower path to princely rule: expanding and solidifying his network of Medici partisans.

Machiavelli has Giovanni make his final and most insistent plea for his children to adhere to own politics of "goodness" on his deathbed in February 1429. Speaking to them privately, Giovanni begs them to abandon the illicit attitudes and behaviors that had ruined so many others before him – including many of their own ancestors. His speech, a brilliant example of the very rhetorical ambiguity it counsels, is worth reproducing in full:

I die content because I leave you rich, healthy, and of quality such that if you follow my footsteps, you will be able to live in Florence honored and in everyone's good graces [*onorati e con la grazia di ciascuno*]. For no single thing makes me die so content as the recollection that I have never offended anyone; rather, I have benefited everyone insofar as I could. And so I urge you to do. In regard to the state, if you wish to live secure, accept from it as much as is given to you by laws

¹⁹ Perversely, this is what *the Signoria itself* had argued in response to Walter's initial attempt to seize power from the city's "middle citizens" using "commands" and "forces" in 1342 (FH 2.34). In this case, the goal of the Signoria had been to dissuade Walter from making himself prince by showing how "dangerous" it was to enslave a free people (FH 2.34):

Have you considered how important this is in a city like this, and how vigorous is the name of freedom, which no force can subdue, no time consume, and no merit counterbalance? Think, lord, how much force will be necessary to *keep* such a city enslaved. Foreign forces, which you can always keep, are not enough; those from inside you cannot trust because those who are your friends now and who encourage you to select this course, just as they will have fought their enemies with your authority, will seek as they can to eliminate you and make themselves princes. The plebs in whom you trust will for any accident . . . reverse itself. So in a short time you may fear to have the whole city hostile, which will be the cause of its ruin and yours. (FH 2.34, emphasis added)

The Signoria concluded from these observations that "you have to hold this city with the greatest violence" – far more than anything than he was actually capable of wielding – "or . . . you have to be content with the authority that we have given you" (FH 2.34). But "[t]hese words did not move the obdurate spirit of the duke in any part" (FH 2.35), and, perhaps inspired by the Signoria's reminder that "that dominion is alone lasting which is voluntary" (FH 2.34), Walter decided instead to change his approach. Now he attempted to *persuade* Florentines to grant him lordship voluntarily, and it is here that we find him invoking the language of freedom and unity that Giovanni would later echo.

and men. This will bring you neither envy nor danger, since it is what a man takes for himself, not what is given to [him], that makes us hate him; and always you will have more than they who, wanting others' share, lose their own, and before losing it live in continual unease. With these arts I have among so many enemies, among so many differences, not only maintained but increased my reputation in this city. Thus, if you will follow in my footsteps, you will maintain and improve yourselves. But if you should do otherwise, do not think that your end will be any more prosperous than the ends of those who in our memory have ruined themselves and destroyed their houses. (FH 4.16)

This advice seems respectable enough, and it was almost certainly designed to come across that way. In fact, it represents Machiavelli's own summation of the Medici political strategy as it had evolved in Giovanni's capable hands. It counsels a scrupulous regard for moral and political virtue – not just the importance of *seeming* virtuous, or even the permissibility of *being* virtuous when necessity permits, but *the necessity of always being virtuous* – as a means of advancing the family's economic, social, and ultimately political ambitions, ambitions that Giovanni makes no effort to condemn or deny.

4.4 Cosimo's Patriotism

Like his father, Cosimo was capable of learning from the experiences of others. He had once joined with his cousin Alamanno in criticizing Giovanni's phlegmatic style, but now he could see how wrong they had been to predict that it would lead to their collective "ruin." Under Giovanni's prudent leadership, the Medici faction had expanded dramatically, particularly within the ranks of the city's *novi cives* or 'new men,' whose rising economic fortunes had only recently permitted them to join the Florentine *reggimento*, and the family itself had gained access to the considerable social and economic resources still at the disposal of the city's magnate houses through a series of carefully arranged marriages with the Bardi and Tornaquinci. These advances had followed on the enormous success of the family bank, which Giovanni had founded in 1397 after the dissolution of his uncle Vieri's firm in 1391/2. It had become one of the most lucrative banking establishments in Europe with the election of the aptly-named Pope Giovanni XXIII in 1410, who had immediately put the majority of Curial accounts under Medici management as repayment for Giovanni's willingness to sponsor his candidacy. As one of Florence's wealthiest men, Giovanni had dedicated himself (and his fortune) to helping others, often through personal favors of the sort that

Machiavelli enumerates in *Discourses* 3.28 and *Histories* 7.1, and his liberality was such that he “died very rich in treasure but even richer in good reputation and good will” (FH 4.16). As Machiavelli’s language here suggests, the latter were significant assets in their own right and they constituted an essential part of the “inheritance” (FH 4.16) that Cosimo received from his father upon his death.

That Cosimo had come to recognize both the value of these assets and the role played by Giovanni’s “excellent qualities” (FH 4.16) in generating them is evident in his own rather abrupt transformation into a model of moral and political virtue, the results of which “saddened” (FH 4.26) those who had hoped to see the Medici party collapse with Giovanni’s passing. As a younger man, he had endorsed the more aggressive and transparently self-aggrandizing policies of Alamanno; now he followed his father’s example in doing only praiseworthy things, such that Machiavelli reports he “conducted himself . . . with greater zeal and more liberality toward his friends” than even his Giovanni had (FH 4.26). Now a “very prudent man,” Cosimo fully understood the political utility of being “liberal” and “humane” (FH 4.26), and he avidly continued to distribute those benefits which had proven to be so effective at converting his fellow citizens into *palleschi*: financial advice and small loans at discounted rates; help brokering marriages and business deals; protection against onerous tax assessments; support in obtaining political office; and so on. We know from the *Discourses* that Machiavelli regards these “private favors” as damaging to republican liberty because they “make men partisans to one-self” and “give spirit to whoever is so favored to be able to corrupt the public and to breach the laws” (D 3.28; see also FH 7.1). Still, it is surprising how little effort Machiavelli makes to conceal his belief that Cosimo’s beneficence was intended to produce a similar result, plainly stating that he “took care to benefit everyone and with his liberality *to make many citizens into his partisans*” (FH 4.26, emphasis added).²⁰

The Albizzi were also distressed to observe that Cosimo “conducted himself with greater spirit in public things” than his father had (FH 4.26). Whereas Giovanni had generally tried to avoid political entanglements

²⁰ The entire passage reads: “. . . [Cosimo] never attempted anything against either the [Albizzi] Party or the state but took care to benefit everyone and with his liberality to make many citizens into partisans. So his example increased the charge against those who were governing, and he himself judged that by this way he would either live in Florence as powerful and as safely as anyone else, or, if because of the ambition of his adversaries it came to something extraordinary, he would be superior both in arms and in favor” (FH 4.26).

on the view that all one could reliably expect them to produce was envy and rancor, Cosimo inserted himself more confidently in public debate – particularly on the subject of Florence's prospective war against Lucca, which ultimately proved to be among the most decisive events in his rise to power. Machiavelli describes this war as having been “set . . . in motion” by “the ambition of men,” which he initially substantiates with reference to the sense among Florentines of “all sorts” that it would be an easy and profitable victory (FH 4.18). We also learn in this chapter that its main supporters within the ranks of the *grandi* were “the Medici party” and Rinaldo Albizzi, an unlikely alliance that Machiavelli does not here explain apart from a brief comment that Rinaldo had endorsed the war because he “judged [it] useful to the republic or because of his own ambition, believing that he would have to be found at the head of that victory” as the leader of the city's dominant faction (FH 4.18). In supporting war, Rinaldo was breaking with his own party, including the advice of Niccolò Uzzano, the same man who had failed to dissuade his party from permitting the selection of Giovanni Medici as *gonfaloniere* eight years before (FH 4.3). In a public debate about the issue, Uzzano had attempted to remind his fellow citizens how costly and burdensome they had found the Visconti wars only a few years before and, in doing so, he had attempted to remind Rinaldo how seriously those wars had destabilized the Albizzi regime, which had been forced to raise taxes drastically in order to hire the necessary soldiers. These new taxes had “filled the city with complaints, and everyone condemned the ambition and greed of the powerful, accusing them of wishing to start an unnecessary war so as to indulge their appetites and to oppress the people so as to dominate them” (FH 4.4; see also 4.7, 4.8, 4.14). Worse still, the Albizzi had been blamed for how badly the war had gone, especially after the city's shameful defeat at Zagonara in which Florentine troops were routed with only three casualties, all of whom were said to have died when they fell from their horses and suffocated in mud (FH 4.6). These were, of course, precisely the reasons why the Medici faction had joined with Rinaldo in supporting the war, as Machiavelli later suggests by noting that “it happened that while Cosimo's party was the one that had favored the campaign, nonetheless many from the opposing party, as men of much reputation in the state, were sent to direct it” (FH 4.26).

Giovanni Medici, in his typically reserved fashion, had counseled against preemptively striking Milan in 1424 even when another confrontation with the Visconti appeared inevitable, reasoning, among other things, that it would easier to solicit help from other Italian states if they

allowed the duke to reveal his “ambition” first (FH 4.5). In recommending this course of action (or rather *inaction*), Giovanni had attempted to put his own political strategy to work on behalf of his city. Cosimo’s more assertive posture toward the war against Lucca reflected his more thoroughly self-interested approach to the city’s foreign affairs: he was prepared to watch Florence suffer a catastrophic defeat at the hands of its mortal enemy, Milan, if it offered him some chance of personal gain. To this end, not only did he advise Florence to embark on this risky and expensive war in the hope that a loss would destroy popular support for the Albizzi regime, he actively sabotaged public confidence in the city’s military leadership by using “every art and industry” to “slander” it (FH 4.26). Thus, Machiavelli writes, “if any loss arose, and many did, it was not fortune or the force of the enemy that was accused, but want of prudence in the commissioner” (FH 4.26) and its two leading administrators, Rinaldo Albizzi and Giovanni Guicciardini, came to be widely defamed as corrupt (FH 4.22 and 4.25).

But Cosimo also recognized that a war against Lucca would provide him with another opportunity for personal advancement. Like most Italian states, Florence had come to rely almost entirely on mercenary troops for the execution of its military operations during the fourteenth century. Its defeat by Lucca at the Battle of Altopascio in 1325 marked the last time a significant numbers of Florentines took up arms on behalf their city.²¹ Machiavelli attributes his city’s disarmament to its anti-magnate policies and especially the Ordinances of Justice, identifying the destruction of its magnate order as “the cause by which Florence was stripped not only of its arms but of all generosity” (FH 2.42) – a curious phrase that alludes to the commercialization of what had once been the primary civic duty associated with knighthood, as well as the falseness of the *generosità* purportedly shown by *ottimati* like Cosimo Medici in funding this new expense.

In high demand across Europe, experienced mercenaries charged exorbitant fees for their services and cities like Florence struggled mightily with colossal budgetary deficits, even given the substantial tax hikes that typically accompanied even small wars. For example, spending on *condottieri* at the end of Florence’s five-year campaign against Gian Galeazzo Visconti stood at 614,024 florins, more than *twice* the city’s total revenue in 1402, and its deficit for *just that year* was a staggering 505,993

²¹ Ed. Brucker 1998, 170.

florins.²² Florence attempted to bridge these shortfalls by collecting forced loans (*prestanze*) from its citizens; when it exhausted even this source of additional revenue, it relied on voluntary high-interest loans issued by its wealthiest citizens. In urging his city to go to war against Lucca, Cosimo was attempting to generate a financial crisis that only a family as extraordinarily wealthy as the Medici could solve.

Giovanni Medici had furnished the city with a titanic loan in the amount of 200,000 florins in 1401 for the purpose of hiring troops from the King of Germany – a sum that was twenty times as large as the average voluntary loan collected during that period and half the city's average wartime military budget.²³ But his most noteworthy intervention in communal finances had been his support for the *catasto* in 1427 (FH 4.14), a new system of progressive taxation intended to reduce Florence's dependence on *prestanze*.²⁴ The popularity of the *catasto* among the city's lower and middle class families had greatly contributed to Giovanni's reputation for being a champion of popular interests. But Cosimo recognized that by personally subsidizing the Florentine government he could bring the entire city within the orbit of his private power, and he advocated war hoping it would generate the economic conditions under which he could assume the role of protector and defender of the Florentine people as such.²⁵ His plan worked beautifully. Between 1428 and 1433, Florentines were paying a shocking 180% of their incomes and 76% of their net assets in taxes and forced loans to pay for this new war,²⁶ with at least a third of households reporting an inability to pay their full assessments.²⁷ The Medici and their allies issued 63% of the supplementary loans necessary to keep the city afloat, with 28% of these loans coming directly from Cosimo himself.²⁸ These "gifts" earned Cosimo a reputation for being the savior

²² Molho 1971, 61. Molho gives Florence's total revenue in 1402 as 274,710 florins, collected largely in the form of indirect taxes (*gabelle*). See also Veseth 1990.

²³ Najemy 2006b, 190.

²⁴ Note that Medici were actually slower to endorse the *catasto* than Machiavelli suggests (Najemy 2006b, 258).

²⁵ It should be noted that both policies also debilitated the Medici family's rivals. The Medici could themselves avoid the *catasto* more easily than others because so much of their wealth was moveable, making it relatively easy for them to shield their assets from taxation. Also, wartime expenses had a disproportionately negative impact on the political eligibility of Albizzi partisans because Florentines in arrears were disqualified from office-holding and, whereas the Medici could pay of the debts of their partisans in order to maintain their eligibility, the Albizzi would not.

²⁶ Molho 1971, 92; cited in Moulakis 1998, 63. ²⁷ Najemy 2006b, 191.

²⁸ Najemy 2006b, 265–266. Between 1425 and 1433, Giovanni di Bicci and Cosimo Medici also paid 91,441 florins in taxes and forced loans – on average, more than a thousand

of Florentine independence, a reputation which in turn became the raw material for the Roman imagery discussed earlier in this chapter in which he is portrayed as a selfless and patriotic defender of the *salus publica* on the order of Camillus, Cicero, and Augustus. Thus it was, Machiavelli explains, that Cosimo “not only maintained but increased” the inheritance of “reputation and goodwill” left to him by his father (FH 4.16).²⁹

4.5 Unarmed Victories?

Florence’s effort to reassert control over Lucca was a complete failure, and it brought the city dangerously close to being absorbed by Lucca’s most powerful ally, Milan. One might have expected Florentines to blame the Medici for this humiliating and costly defeat, as they had been among the most hawkish proponents of war. But throughout the conflict they had used their subordinate position within the regime to their advantage, shifting blame for the city’s embarrassing performance onto their rivals, the Albizzi, whose standing as the leading family of the Florentine *reggimento* left them open to charges of mismanagement. By 1433, the ascendancy of the Albizzi faction was in serious jeopardy. By contrast, the Medici party was more extensive, disciplined, and ambitious than ever, with Cosimo poised to replace Rinaldo degli Albizzi as the principal man (*principe*) of the city.

One way that Florentine parties had minimized political competition in the past was by exiling their opponents (FH 2.4, 2.6, 2.18, 2.20, 2.32) and this was the solution to which many Albizzi partisans now turned. The proposal to “ruin” Cosimo by driving him from the city had the endorsement of Rinaldo, the young and relatively inexperienced party leader who had succeeded Maso degli Albizzi upon his death in 1417 (FH 4.27). But it was opposed by Niccolò da Uzzano, whose “virtue” Machiavelli says had actually kept the state under the control of *ottimati* after Maso’s passing (FH 4.2). Uzzano’s lengthy rejoinder to Niccolò Barbadori – whose own argument on behalf of exile Machiavelli does not even bother to recount, despite the fact that “he encouraged [Uzzano] with all the best

florins per annum *more* than the yearly profits of their holding company (Molho 1971, 100).

²⁹ Machiavelli is famously a critic of the unreliability of mercenary arms (see especially P 12). But even here Machiavelli warns that “a republic armed with its own arms is brought to obey one of its citizens with more difficulty than is a republic armed with foreign arms” (P 12). Florentine political experience suggests why he believes this to be true.

reasons he knew" (FH 4.27) – lays bare the two-fold nature of Medici power.³⁰ Urging his fellow partisans to "measure their forces and those of Cosimo" before orchestrating a showdown between them, Uzzano points out that Cosimo has assembled a superior clientele of allies and supporters (FH 4.27). Despite his reputation for being a popular leader, he enjoys just as much support within the ranks of the *ottimati* as the heads of the so-called 'noble party,' and the fact that he is also "followed by all the plebs" means he would almost certainly prevail "if things come to arms" between them, not least because "they are so many" (FH 4.27). Consistent with his opening appeal to political experience ("It would be better for you, for your house, and for our republic if you and the others who follow you in this opinion had beards of silver rather than gold . . . for their counsels, coming from a grey head full of experience, would be wiser and more useful to everyone"), Uzzano points to "the example of the old nobility of this city who have been eliminated by the plebs" in urging Barbadori to view Cosimo's popular affiliations especially with "fear" instead of "hope" (FH 4.27).

But Cosimo's power was founded on more than just the size, breadth, and unity of the Medici party. It was also rooted in his complete mastery of the city's ideological terrain, which made it impossible for the Albizzi to attack him without further undermining their own credibility with the Florentine public. Machiavelli notes in the very first line of the chapter that Cosimo's maneuverings were "perfectly understood" by men like Uzzano, who immediately recognized that he was attempting to make himself prince of the city (FH 4.27). Uzzano, however, berates his fellow partisans for presuming they would gain "credit" with the Florentine people by destroying the Medici simply because they had "justice" on their side (whereas Cosimo would lose his "credit" with them once his illicit motives were exposed [FH 4.27]). The problem, as Uzzano explains it, was that Florence's language of virtue and vice could not do the work of sorting politically 'good' and 'bad' actions in this case.

The deeds of Cosimo that make us suspect him are these: because he helps everyone with his money, and not only private individuals but the public, and not only Florentines but the condottieri; because he favors this or that citizen who has need of the magistrates; because by the good will that he has in the generality of people

³⁰ This is, of course, fully consistent with Machiavelli's private confession to his friend Donato Giannotti that in writing the *History* he made Cosimo's adversaries say what "means and tricks" he had used to ascend to "so great a height" (quoted in Mansfield and Banfield 1988, xiii).

he pulls this or that friend to higher ranks of honor. Thus one would have to allege as the causes for driving him out that he is merciful, helpful, liberal, and loved by everyone. So tell me: what law is it that forbids or that blames and condemns in men mercy, liberality, and love? And although these are all modes that send men flying to a principedom, nonetheless they are not believed to be so, nor are we adequate to the task of making them be so understood, because our modes have destroyed their faith in us, and the city, which is naturally partisan and, since it has always lived with parties, is corrupt, cannot give hearing to such accusations. (FH 4.27)

It may have been true that Cosimo was acquiring princely powers. But insofar as they were being generated by the performance of what any Florentine would regard as ‘good deeds,’ they could not be meaningfully condemned in the idiom of Florentine public life.

Machiavelli’s account of the momentous events precipitated by the conclusion of hostilities with Lucca on April 26 1433 in the closing chapters of Book 4 is designed to validate Uzzano’s warning that Cosimo could no longer be effectively opposed, even through the use of extraordinary modes, because he possessed a rhetorical advantage over his opponents. Now the sole “prince of the Party,” Rinaldo began to petition everyone who might be drawn as Gonfalonier to “arm themselves to liberate their fatherland from that man who . . . by the malignity of few and the ignorance of many, was leading it into slavery” (FH 4.28). When Bernardo Guadagni’s name was finally drawn for the position, Machiavelli reports that Rinaldo begged him to imitate, of all people, *Salvestro Medici* by using the powers associated with his office to destroy Cosimo, assuring him that “friends with arms were ready to help him” in this enterprise (FH 4.28). Importantly, Rinaldo attempts to justify the use of these politically disreputable means with reference to a politically honorable end: namely, preventing Cosimo from becoming a “prince” (FH 4.28). Explaining that it was Guadagni’s duty to “take back to the state [from the Medici] so as to bring back . . . freedom to the fatherland,” he assures him that by killing Cosimo he would be doing “justly” what Salvestro, by using his office to undermine the legitimate power of the Guelf party, had done “unjustly” (FH 4.28).³¹

Rinaldo’s entreaties were sufficient to convince Guadagni to have Cosimo arrested, but not enough to secure his death. Once imprisoned, Cosimo’s guard, Federigo Malavolti, informed him that he did not intend

³¹ Rinaldo says that Salvestro “check[ed] unjustly the greatness of the Guelfs, to whom the government belonged because of the blood spent by their ancestors” (FH 4.28). Machiavelli makes it clear that Rinaldo wanted to have Cosimo killed in the [next chapter](#).

to participate in any “wickedness” being planned by the Albizzi because, as he puts it, “I do not wish to defile by hands with the blood of anyone, especially not yours, since you have never offended me” – a pledge to which Cosimo allegedly responded with many tears and kisses, “thank[ing] him . . . for such a merciful and kindly deed [*sì piatoso e amorevole officio*]” and “promising to be most grateful [*gratissimo*] to him if ever he were given the opportunity” (FH 4.29). And true to Malavolti’s prediction that he would not be executed by the Signoria thanks to his “many friends . . . in the palace and outside” (FH 4.29), Cosimo was only sentenced to exile. Machiavelli points out that Malavolti himself played no small part in bringing this outcome about: he arranged for Cosimo to receive a visit from one of Guadagni’s associates, who then delivered the bribe responsible for making the Gonfalonier suddenly become “more humane” (FH 4.29).

Rinaldo had engaged in a test of strength with Cosimo – a test of *party* strength – and the outcome had been a draw, at best. As Uzzano had predicted, Cosimo had proved himself to be Rinaldo’s superior at making and keeping men his partisans, thanks not just to his “money” but also his ability to exploit their “corruptible minds,” an ability that Machiavelli illustrates in Cosimo’s exchange with Malavolti concerning the justice of Albizzi efforts to have him killed (FH 4.27). Uzzano had placed special emphasis on Cosimo’s ability to mobilize the city’s language of virtue and vice on behalf of his princely ambitions, a form of rhetorical dexterity that was fully evident in Cosimo’s public response to being exiled. Machiavelli does not recount this speech, which Cosimo made before the Signoria in early October 1433. But it clearly informs the speeches that Machiavelli attributes to both Giovanni Medici and Niccolò Uzzano. Responding to allegations that he posed a threat to republican liberty because of his inordinate wealth and ambition, Cosimo had insisted that he could not possibly be the political “villain” he stood accused of being because everyone knew he was “an honest and good merchant” who had “always tried to merit the love of good men” by doing good deeds.³² At the very least, he had “never permitted wrong to be done to anyone.”³³ As evidence that he was not politically ambitious, he could point to the fact that he had “never frequented the Palace save when [he] was summoned” and had “always declined to be nominated an official.”³⁴ Moreover, he had never “roused hatred of the Republic” within the *popolo minuto* by treating it badly, as tyrannically-inclined *grandi* had long since acquired a reputation

³² Ross 1910, 22.³³ Ross 1910, 22.³⁴ Ross 1910, 22.

for doing, nor had he engaged in any “ill-behavior” that had “caused a city to rebel or to be taken from you [Signori]” – “on the contrary,” he notes, “our money bought several.”³⁵ Urging his audience to “ask [its] soldiers how many times they were paid by me . . . with my own money, to be returned to me when convenient to the Commune,” a clear reference to the enormous military subsidies he had only recently provided the city, Cosimo had laid claim to virtues ranging from benevolence to generosity to patriotism as proof that he was actually a republican citizen in good standing.³⁶

In defending himself before the Signoria, Cosimo had hardly claimed for himself the stature of a Camillus. If anything, he had expressed a distinctly un-Roman aversion to what had since become known and celebrated as the *vita activa*. But his speech contained the seed of what humanist writers would later argue on his behalf, that Medici power was legitimate because it was always well-used. Cosimo could reasonably claim to have always done what his city had asked him to do, willingly and without reservation; to have maintained a respectful posture toward the city’s laws, institutions, and magistrates; to have put his private resources at the disposal of the government for the advancement of public enterprises and the provision of public goods; to have assisted others privately when they asked for his help (and sometimes even when they had not!); and to have contributed in these ways, perhaps more than any other Florentine, to the continued safety and well-being of his fellow citizens. In all these regards, he had proven himself to be a good man. In what terms, then, could he possibly be described as someone dangerous and bad?

The suspicion that Cosimo was somehow using good deeds to accomplish bad ends had stood at the heart of Niccolò Tinucci’s lengthy and vehement denunciation of Cosimo before the Signoria, in which he had insisted that:

Many times I heard Cosimo and Averardo say that the best way to keep oneself powerful [was] to keep [the city] in a state of war and to serve the needs of the war economy with ready cash, and then make loans to the commune that are secure and highly profitable. The people will have the impression of being helped by the very persons who reap profit, honor, greatness, and power.³⁷

This is the very suspicion that animates Machiavelli’s depiction of the Medici in the *Histories*, which is designed to show (in a phrase used throughout the book, and sometimes even attributed to the Medici

³⁵ Ross 1910, 22.

³⁶ Ross 1910, 22–3.

³⁷ Quoted in Najemy 2006b, 272–273.

themselves [FH 8.10]) that prudent *grandi* can and will learn to conceal the indecency of their political ambitions behind a façade of decent appearances.

Cosimo's speech before the Signoria was designed to allay concerns about his ultimate political intentions as the most powerful man in Florence. But it was also a speech that cleverly advanced the very intentions being disowned, crystallizing the rhetorical strategy that his most insightful opponents were trying in vain to expose. Cosimo had used his prosecution for treason as an opportunity to publicize and verify his good reputation. Moreover, he had used his own innocence to redirect the charge of treason against the Albizzi themselves, whom he accused of being the *truly* "wicked" and "villainous" men of the city. Their injustice, he claimed, was evident in their willingness to punish a man who ought to be praised and rewarded for his good deeds; their envy and selfishness in their willingness to deprive Florence of its most generous benefactor in order to secure their own political position; and their lawlessness in their readiness to kill Cosimo against the orders of the Signoria if they were afforded the opportunity to do so. If these are the qualities of bad men, the Albizzi were bad men indeed – or so Cosimo could reasonably argue.

If anyone doubted whether Cosimo was really as deferential to the city's republican political orders as he had claimed to be, or if his enemies were really as dangerous as he had implied, the events of the following year appeared to validate both of these arguments in full. Following his arrest, Averardo Medici had reaffirmed his family's loyalty to the Florentine government by insisting that "all [the Signoria's] commands must be regarded as just and honorable and reasonable, and one must await pardon and restitution from them," not try to evade or resist their power.³⁸ Likewise, Cosimo had pledged his complete submission to the Signoria's authority, maintaining that he would even go "to live amongst the Arabs" if it ordered him to do so³⁹ – or, as Machiavelli describes his reaction, he "accepted banishment with a cheerful face, asserting that wherever that Signoria might wish to send him he was ready to stay voluntarily" (FH 4.29). Even in Venice, Cosimo continued to display what Dale Kent has called "scrupulous constitutional rectitude," refusing to participate in schemes to force his way back into the city and even reporting a conspiracy against the Albizzi regime hatched by one of his own kinsman.⁴⁰ This was hardly normal behavior among Florence's large and ever-changing class of political exiles. But, flush with resources and

³⁸ Kent 1978, 313.

³⁹ Ross 1910, 21.

⁴⁰ Kent 1978, 308–11.

supporters, the Medici could afford to take a more relaxed view of their circumstances and maintain the posture of civic respectability that had served them so well in years past. Rinaldo Albizzi, by contrast, had taken a more forceful approach to the situation: by using physical intimidation to ensure the Florentine people, among whom Cosimo was “universally loved” (FH 4.30), created the *balià* necessary to issue his death sentence (FH 4.28); by preparing “arms” to keep Cosimo out of the city following his exile (FH 4.30); and by leading “a great number of armed men” toward the Palazzo Vecchio when a pro-Medici Signoria took office in September 1434 (FH 4.32) – an action that was condemned by one eyewitness as “something no one ought to do.”⁴¹

In *Discourses* 1.33, Machiavelli endorses Uzzano’s caution in dealing with the Medici, maintaining that Cosimo would never have been made “prince of the republic” by his party were it not for the “manifest opposition” shown by Albizzi partisans in trying to eliminate him.⁴² To the puzzlement of some readers, he uses Cosimo’s example to recommend “temporizing” in those situations where a citizen has managed to acquire more power than is consistent with a free way of life because “almost always those who attempt to allay it” at this late stage “accelerate the evil that they suspected from it for themselves” (D 1.33). Together with Julius Caesar, another man who made himself strong through the “favor” he acquired thanks to his “virtue,” Cosimo illustrates the dilemma that republics face when one of their citizens has amassed “such reputation” that he can “bring fear to the state” – it is “dangerous to offend him” and yet it also “very dangerous to allow him to remain thus” (D 1.33). Urging those who would try to “cancel” these men to “open their eyes” to the possibility that instead of “pushing a thing back” they are really “pulling it along,” and instead of “drowning a plant” they are really “watering it,” Machiavelli advises temporizing for as long as possible (D 1.33).

In the Florentine case, the Albizzi had attempted to eliminate Cosimo because his popularity threatened their own position within the city’s

⁴¹ Quoted in Kent 1978, 333 and 338. Machiavelli tells an interesting story here about how Rinaldo’s arms failed him, which includes the unwillingness of other party leaders to “fill [their] city with blood” in order to eliminate the Medici party completely (FH 4.31); the ability of the Signori to dissuade many citizens from throwing their support behind the Albizzi party (FH 4.31); and the intervention of Pope Eugene IV, who ordered that Rinaldo himself lay down his arms (FH 4.32).

⁴² Although Machiavelli also criticizes Uzzano in D 1.33 for having made the “error” of allowing Cosimo to acquire a “reputation” sufficient to “bring fear to the state” in the first place. But he admits that “it is difficult to recognize these evils when they arise” (D 1.33).

ruling group. But they had failed to recognize that exiling him would only solidify his power by alarming his partisans, who had always looked to him as their protector and defender in the face of adversity (for Machiavelli, then, this episode serves to illustrate his observation in *Discourses* 1.7 that partisanship is intensified by the “fear” generated when private individuals can harm one another with impunity, which is itself an extension of the observation he makes in *Discourses* 1.4 that “tumults” are only good for republican liberty when they are not accompanied by exile or blood). Moreover, Cosimo’s exile had the unintended, but certainly foreseeable, effect of arousing public sympathy for him, thereby intensifying those feelings of love and affection that were also constitutive of the partisan attachments that had made him an especially powerful man. Thus Machiavelli reports that Florence was left a grieving widow in Cosimo’s absence, bereft of its most beloved citizen until he finally returned to adoring crowds the following year (FH 4.30).⁴³ And finally, the Albizzi had provided Cosimo with a perfect opportunity to enact his argument that Medici power was consistent with, and maybe even necessary for, the maintenance of Florentine liberty. In persecuting the Medici, unjustly, from behind the façade of public institutions, the Albizzi invited charges of moral and political corruption that, in turn, allowed Cosimo to position himself as a restorer of law and order in exiling *them* only a short time later.⁴⁴

4.6 Conspiracy and Loyalty

Machiavelli uses Cosimo Medici’s rise to power to demonstrate the weakness of arms in the face of legitimate authority, a lesson that he reaffirms in his narration of the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478. The Pazzi were among the most ancient and distinguished houses of Florence, descended from the city’s feudal nobility and leaders of its two most profitable industries,

⁴³ On the widow metaphor, see Richardson 2009, 10 n. 30 and Williams 1943, 86.

⁴⁴ These concerns explain Machiavelli’s somewhat puzzling advice in D 1.33 to “temporize” with dangers that arise in republics, rather than try to “extinguish” them. Citing Cosimo Medici’s rise to power as an example of how an aggressive intervention only accelerated the growth of the targeted malady, Machiavelli counsels that “[i]n all things, princes who plan to cancel them or oppose their strength and thrust should open their eyes, so as not to give them increase instead of decrease, believing that they are pushing a thing back while pulling it along, or indeed that they are drowning a plant by watering it. But they should consider well the strength of the malady, and if you see you have enough to cure it, set yourself at it without hesitation; otherwise let it be and do not attempt it in any mode.”

the silk trade and banking. As former allies of the Uzzano family and rivals of the Medici both commercially and socially, they had suffered from particularly onerous tax assessments in the years following Cosimo's recall from exile, in addition to being excluded from most public offices due to their magnate status. These handicaps were dissolved in 1459, however, with the marriage of Cosimo's granddaughter (and Lorenzo's sister) Bianca di Piero de' Medici to Guglielmo di Antonio de' Pazzi, which Cosimo had orchestrated with a view to solidifying the loyalty and cooperation of the wider Pazzi family. Now firmly joined to the Medici through ties of kinship, the Pazzi had enjoyed increases in both "wealth and state," as Machiavelli puts it, into the 1470s (FH 8.2). Beginning in 1471, however, Lorenzo had attempted to roll back these gains by excluding the Pazzi from various honors they had come to regard as their due, initiating a vicious cycle of suspicion, fear, injury, and indignation that culminated with the passage of a law designed to block them from inheriting the estate of Giovanni Buonromei (FH 8.2).⁴⁵ Infuriated, Francesco Pazzi, the immediate target of the law, conspired with Girolamo Riario, nephew of Pope Sixtus IV and lord of Imola, and Francesco Salviati, the archbishop of Pisa, to get his revenge by killing both Lorenzo and Giuliano Medici and taking away their state (Lorenzo had recently attempted to prevent Riario from acquiring Imola and Salviati from acquiring Pisa, hence Riario's cooperation with the scheme). To this core group, Jacopo Pazzi, Pope Sixtus IV, and King Ferrante I of Naples were added together with a number of smaller players.

In petitioning for the support of the pope and the king, Francesco Pazzi and Girolamo Riario had described the assassination of the Medici brothers as an "easy" thing to do, Machiavelli writes (FH 8.3). But their confidence was not shared by Giovan Battista da Montesecco, the pope's condottiere and a man "highly esteemed in war," who viewed the objective as a "difficult and dangerous one" and only joined the group because he felt obligated to help to Riario and Sixtus (FH 8.3). According to Machiavelli, Salviati attempted to dispel Battista's hesitation by "pointing out the aid the pope and king would supply to their enterprise . . . , the hatreds the citizens of Florence bore toward the Medici, the relatives that the Salviati and the Pazzi had behind them, the ease of killing the Medici because they went about the city without company and without suspicion, and

⁴⁵ Machiavelli attributes Lorenzo's aggressiveness to being "hot" and "want[ing] everyone to recognize everything as from him" (FH 8.3) – a description that contrasts with the "coldness" of his ancestors, particularly Giovanni Medici.

later, when they were dead, the ease of changing the state" (FH 8.3). But Machiavelli reports that Battista did not "entirely believe" these claims "as he had heard many other Florentines speak otherwise," referring, it would seem, to Salviati's contention that the Medici regime lacked popular support (FH 8.3).

Battista eventually withdrew from the plot when it was finally decided that Lorenzo and Guiliano would be killed while attending Easter Mass, claiming that "he would never have enough spirit to commit such an excess in church and accompany betrayal with sacrilege" (FH 8.5). The responsibility for killing Lorenzo was subsequently transferred to a pair of priests named Antonio and Stefano, a move that Machiavelli calls "the beginning of the ruin of their enterprise" because these two men were, as might be expected, "by practice and by nature . . . very inept for so great an undertaking" (FH 8.5).⁴⁶ When it came time to strike, Giuliano was quickly stabbed to death by Bernardo Bandini and Francesco Pazzi. But Lorenzo managed to survive the attack thanks to the "sluggishness and weakness" shown by his assassins, who only managed to wound him in the neck before fleeing the scene (FH 8.6).

Still, the Medici regime was in serious jeopardy. Lorenzo had taken refuge in the church's sacristy until he could be hurried by supporters to his family's palazzo. In the meantime, a group of anti-Medici partisans led by Salviati had forced their way into the Palazzo della Signoria and occupied its lower floors, confining the priors to its upper chambers, and Jacopo Pazzi had ridden into the Piazza della Signoria at the head of a hundred armed supporters calling the people to liberty. But, as Machiavelli is careful to relate, Jacopo's cries were met, at least initially, with silence. Much as Uzzano had warned almost sixty years before, the Medici had always conducted themselves in such a way as to make the accusation that they were tyrants literally *unintelligible*. As Machiavelli puts it here, the Florentine people offered no response because they "had been made deaf by the fortune and liberality of the Medici" (FH 8.8). Moreover, they could not understand what Jacopo was calling them to do because liberty was something "not known in Florence" (FH 8.8).

Jacopo's inability to muster popular support for Lorenzo's ouster marked the beginning of the conspiracy's precipitous collapse. Jacopo returned to his palazzo and eventually fled the city with his allies, heading

⁴⁶ Machiavelli offers a fuller treatment of the role played by "spirit" in conspiracies in D 3.6, in which he adduces the Pazzi conspiracy as a prime example of how difficult it is for assassins to keep their spirits "firm." See especially sections 12 through 15.

for the Romagna where he could expect to be sheltered by Riario's friends and family. Salviati's men were driven from the Palazzo della Signoria, and Salviati himself was hung from its walls still wearing his archbishop's miter. Francesco Pazzi was caught and hung naked alongside Salviati's body. Medici partisans across the city began to gather in support of their patron, shouting Lorenzo's name and pursuing the Pazzi "with words full of anger and deeds full of cruelty" (FH 8.9). Indeed, the Florentine people as a whole began to gravitate toward Lorenzo, freely offering him the help and assistance that Jacopo had begged for in vain. As Machiavelli puts it, "[t]here was no citizen armed or unarmed who did not go to the houses of Lorenzo in that necessity, and each one offered himself and his property to him: so great was the fortune and the grace that had been acquired by this house through its prudence and liberality" (FH 8.9).

Over the next several days, Machiavelli goes on to report, so many Florentines were killed "that the streets were filled with parts of men" (FH 8.9), only one of whom is said to have received any public sympathy: Rinato Pazzi, a "prudent and grave man" who had refused to take any part in the conspiracy when it was revealed to him by his kinsmen (FH 8.4). But Lorenzo's two most powerful enemies, the pope and the king, were undeterred by this massive show of public support on behalf of the Medici regime, and both sent armies to Florence intending to force his expulsion. Machiavelli uses their approach as an opportunity to show Lorenzo defending himself rhetorically against the charge of tyranny before his own people, whose loyalty to him was about to be tested a second time. Lorenzo's lengthy and fascinating self-defense turns on the claim that he cannot be a tyrant because he doesn't *look* or *act* like one – his role in the city simply does not fit conventional descriptions of tyranny. For example, he opens his speech by reminding his audience that unlike tyrants, who stereotypically acquire and maintain their principalities by fear and/or force, his power has been freely given to him by his fellow citizens (or, as he prefers to call them, his *amici* [FH 8.10]). If anything, he claims, this is the lesson taught by the Pazzi conspiracy itself. Instead of exposing Lorenzo as a tyrant, his enemies had only confirmed the legitimacy of his *stato* by eliciting such a remarkable and unambiguous demonstration of public support. This is why Lorenzo confesses to "rejoic[ing]" when he considers "with what promptness, with what zeal, with what love, and with what united consent in the whole city [*unito consenso di tutta la città*]" he was defended and his brother's death was avenged in the days following the initial attack (FH 8.10). Moreover, Lorenzo paints his victory over the Pazzi as only the most recent example of his family's

indebtedness to the Florentine people for its *stato*, asserting that “our house *never* rose to any rank of greatness [*grandezza*] to which it was not thrust by this palace and by your united consent [*unito consenso*]” (FH 8.10, emphasis added). Adducing the facts of history *as Machiavelli himself understands them* to support his point, Lorenzo reminds his audience:

My grandfather Cosimo did not return from exile with arms and by violence [*con le armi e per violenza*] but with your consent and union [*il consenso e unione vostra*]. My father, old and infirm, did not indeed defend the state against so many enemies, but you with your authority and benevolence [*ma voi con l'autorità e benivolenza vostra*] defended it; nor after the death of my father . . . would I have maintained the rank of house if it had not been for your advice and favors [*i consigli e favori vostri*] . . . (FH 8.10)

On the basis of these observations, Lorenzo then glides effortlessly to the more questionable conclusion that “my house could not have ruled and would not be able to rule this republic *if you together with it had not ruled and did not rule now*” (FH 8.10, emphasis added).

But perhaps the Medici had done something else to deserve being attacked by the Pazzi? Were they guilty of some other wrong that justified being injured and killed by their own kinsmen? Surely they did nothing to offend the Pazzi “privately,” Lorenzo reasons, pointing out rather sinisterly that “if we had offended them, they would not have had an opportunity to offend us” (FH 8.10). Nor should the Medici be blamed for any “public injuries” the Pazzi may have suffered, Lorenzo argues, referring obliquely to the legal controversy surrounding the Buonromei inheritance. These were decisions made by public magistrates, after all, and by claiming they were ordered by the Medici, Lorenzo insists, “they offend you [citizens] more than us, more this palace and the majesty of this government than our house” because such a charge implies that the Florentine people are willing to “injure undeservedly” one of their own for sake of advancing the Medici “cause” (FH 8.10). Beyond the fact that “you, if we had wanted it, would not have done it,” Lorenzo sees no reason to give credence to Pazzi accusations of political corruption because *everyone knows* that his family would never have asked others to commit a wrong on their behalf. More than anything else, the Medici had acquired a reputation for being virtuous men and it is simply implausible that a family so well-known for benefiting *strangers* would deliberately harm their own relatives (FH 8.10).

Like Cosimo before him, Lorenzo attempts to defend the *legitimacy* of his family’s enormous power without denying they actually *possess* it.

Indeed, he openly admits to being driven by the very ambitiousness that even Cosimo had once made an effort to publicly deny. The “truth” of the matter, he confesses, is that the Medici have always “striven . . . to surpass everyone [*è sforzata . . . vincere ciascuno*]” (FH 8.10). What matters, in his view, is *how* they have attempted to outdo others: the *propriety* of the deeds and transactions responsible for producing their extraordinary social and political standing. And in this regard Lorenzo draws a sharp contrast between his own family, which has “always been exalted . . . with such agreement” by the Florentine people as a reward for its “humanity, liberality, [and] . . . benefits [*umanità, liberalità . . . i beneficii*]” (FH 8.10), and the Pazzi, who have attempted (less successfully) to advance themselves using slander, treachery, and even violence. If they are dissatisfied with their position in the city, Lorenzo says, “[l]et them bear hatred for their own ancestors, who with pride and avarice [*con la superbia e con la avarizia*] took from themselves the reputation that ours knew how to earn with efforts contrary to theirs” (FH 8.10) – a thinly veiled allusion to the Pazzi family’s magnate roots. Moreover, their recent behavior exposes how unreformed the Pazzi are. In musing that “[i]f they did it out of hatred and envy [*odio e invidia*] they have of our authority, they offend you, not us, since it is you who gave it to us,” Lorenzo associates them with the anti-social attitudes and disdain for popular judgment typical of magnates from centuries past.

Over the course of his speech, in a manner reminiscent of Cosimo’s response to the charges made against him by the Albizzi in 1433, Lorenzo gradually turns his self-defense into a prosecution of his accusers, maintaining that it is the *Pazzi* who should be condemned and opposed for being dangerous to republican liberty. It is *they* who have attacked the city’s republican orders, Lorenzo argues, not the Medici. In forcibly “seizing the palace,” the most recognizable symbol of the city’s republican constitution and home to its most powerful executive body, *they* have exposed themselves as men driven by a loathsome “desire to dominate [*desiderio di dominare*]” (FH 8.10) that has no home in a free republic. Indeed, their willingness “to come with armed men into the piazza,” the civic space dedicated assembling the Florentine *popolo* for the purpose of collective deliberation and decision-making, “reveals and condemns by itself how ugly, ambitious, and damnable [their] cause is” (FH 8.10).

In short, Machiavelli uses Lorenzo’s speech to display the rhetorical virtuosity that had come to stand as the firmest foundation and surest defense of Medici power. In it, Lorenzo proves himself a master of political legitimation, achieved through the creative mobilization and

redployment of his city's traditional normative categories. His *virtuoso* performance improvises around a central theme, cooperative sociability, which it continually invokes in the form of culturally-recognizable metaphors, references, and associations. Moreover, it exemplifies and enacts the very argument it offers on behalf of Medici power – that it exists only as a consequence of sociable interactions and exchanges – by persuasively engaging its audience. In crafting this speech for Lorenzo, Machiavelli exposes this type of rhetorical maneuvering for what it is and, just as importantly, urges a critical re-examination of the pro-social values it references. Let us now turn to this second lesson.

Republican Virtue, Reconsidered

A man who loses his friends is worse than dead.

– Paolo da Certalda, *Libro di buoni costumi*¹

The diaries, manuscripts, and letters of Renaissance Florentines testify to their intense, almost obsessive, concern with making and keeping friends.² Florence was an intensely competitive society, and the perception of vulnerability at the hands of one's enemies stimulated a constant effort to extend and fortify the network of *amici* upon whom one could depend for protection and assistance in times of need. As Dale Kent has amply shown, the purpose of friendship in this context was not the experience of intimacy but the generation of trust.³ Florentines were eager to personalize their relationships as a way of making trustworthiness a matter of honor, extending the designations of kinship (“father,” “son,” “brother”) to neighbors, political contacts, and even business associates. Friends could be counted on to honor their contracts, pool their resources, and work together in pursuit of common goals, and consequently Florentines understood the security of virtually every transaction – personal loans, marriage agreements, legal assistance, political representation, transfers of property, artistic commissions, charitable donations, letters of recommendation, and more – to hinge on the friendship joining each party.

The language of friendship in Florence was a relatively stable and well-defined one, patterned heavily on Roman sources made available through

¹ Quoted in Weissman 1982, 28.

² See especially Weissman 1982 and Kent 2009. Also Eckstein 1995; Kent and Kent 1982; Kent 1977; Trexler 1980; and McLean 2007.

³ Kent 2009, 4–6.

the revival of humanist learning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁴ These naturally included the works of Cicero, and even the most rudimentary education in the classics would have included both *On Duties* and *On Friendship*. The blending of these sources with Christian and chivalric ideals produced a richly textured vocabulary that Florentines deployed in a virtually endless succession of friendly gestures and requests. Love (*amore*), favor (*grazia*), desire (*desiderio*), benefit (*benefizio*), liberality (*liberalità*), mercy (*pietà*), obligation (*obligo*), satisfaction (*soddisfazione*), duty (*ufficio*), obedience (*ubbidienza*), honor (*onore*), defense (*difesa*), hesitation or respect (*rispetto*), gratitude (*gratia*), and goodwill (*benivolenza*) – this was the language that Florentines used to communicate with and about friends, and at its very heart was the concept of loyalty and trustworthiness (*fede*).

Any reader of Machiavelli will recognize this vocabulary, and his writings are helpfully understood as sustained meditations on the political implications of friendship (*amicizia*) as it was theorized and practiced in Renaissance Florence. Central to this effort to understand the interplay between social practices and political institutions was the idea of trustworthiness as it was nourished by a combination of Roman and Christian sources and encoded within Florentine rituals, stories, gestures, identities, and relationships. While some historians have maintained that patron-client bonds were so pervasive and consequential in Florentine society that it would have been impossible for most Florentines to think critically about them,⁵ Machiavelli's *Histories* offers a perceptive account of how modern elites like the Medici were using this ethic of reciprocity to advance their own princely aspirations. The Medici may have lacked the arms possessed by their Milanese counterparts, the Sforzas, but they had another 'weapon' of sorts: a well-earned reputation for using their considerable economic and social resources to help others. Against the background of certain prevailing ideas of virtuous conduct, the Medici used these friendly gestures to assemble a vast network of personal allies, allowing them to dominate Florentine political life for more than seventy years. Having exposed to his readers how crucial patronage was to Medici rule, Machiavelli urges the "liberal spirits" among them to regard it as inimical to republican liberty and consider how a republic can safely avoid this most dangerous form of political division (FH 5.1, 7.1).

⁴ The lexicon of 'friendship' in the Florentine context has been most fully explored by McLean 2007 the Kent 2009.

⁵ Kent 2009, 12.

This chapter will look at Machiavelli's concerns about the "effectual truth" of certain Roman ideas of virtue, and particularly the fact that social virtues like *fides* have historically formed the normative underpinning for patron-client relationships. Anyone who reads the *Prince* knows that Machiavelli's understanding of princely virtue is unconventional with respect to both classical and Christian ethics. But when he turns to the subject of republican virtue in the *Discourses*, he seems to reposition himself as a defender of the traditional virtues of ancient Rome: asserting that republican citizens should "always have recourse to those judgments or those remedies that were judged or ordered by the ancients" (D 1.pr.), he appears to defend the full range of beliefs, dispositions, and practices that Romans associated with a life of honor and esteem.⁶ In what follows, however, I argue that Machiavelli rejects key aspects of Roman virtue, including norms of personal loyalty and trustworthiness, because they have a proven record of undermining republican liberty. For Machiavelli, republican politics is concerned above all with limiting power; and its primary mode of self-defense is "crushing" individuals who exceed these limits "without *rispetto*" for mitigating claims of authority or obligation (D 1.7). Roman social virtues cut against these objectives by encouraging what he calls "partisanship," or bonds of mutual obligation that allowed well-positioned individuals to flout republican orders with impunity. In their place, Machiavelli recommends a new portrait of good citizenship in which unsociable traits like severity assume a central place.⁷

5.1 Republican Liberty and the Problem of Social Power

Ancient Rome was home to an "aristocratic ethos" in which political and military accomplishment was repaid with honor.⁸ Romans who performed valuable services on behalf of their city could expect to win the recognition and approval of their fellow citizens and competition for honor among *nobiles* was famously intense. It is unsurprising, then, that Romans possessed a "galaxy of partial synonyms" for honor, including *honor*, *laus*, *decus*, *gloria*, *dignitas*, *auctoritas*, and *maiestas*.⁹ Some of these terms, like *auctoritas*, emphasized the special influence that honorable men possessed as a result of their outstanding reputation.¹⁰ *Auctoritas* referred particularly to the "moral leadership" they exercised

⁶ Berlin 1979 [1953]; Coby 1999; Hulliung 1984. Cf. Sullivan 1996.

⁷ As Wood (1972) has put it, Machiavelli defends the value of a kind of "asocial sociability" among republican citizens.

⁸ Rosenstein 1990, 114. ⁹ Lendon 1997, 30–1. ¹⁰ Lendon 1997, 273–4.

by virtue of their “superior record of judgment and achievement.”¹¹ Etymologically linked to *augeo* (to increase), *auctoritas* signified a person’s accumulated credibility. This credibility served to validate his future opinions and advice, giving his recommendations a moral force that contrasted with, and generally superseded, the coercive power (*potestas*) of public magistrates. *Auctoritates*, “by virtue of their wisdom, their position, their natural force of character, their achievements, their family tradition, or some combination of these, were expected to give a lead which others should follow.”¹² Romans eagerly sought their guidance on matters both public and private and the counsel of *auctoritates* was regarded as morally binding.¹³

Roman honor was, then, something more than just an attractive byproduct of political achievement. It was also, crucially, symbolic capital that could be accumulated, invested, and exchanged across a variety of “fields” including politics itself.¹⁴ The simple fact that, as Wirszubski puts it, “*auctoritas* was power” was enough to make at least a few Romans wary of its consolidation in the hands of any one person or group.¹⁵ Brutus, for example, characterized Cicero’s *auctoritas* as being “the most that one man can possibly have in a free state,” suggesting that Rome’s republican identity required limitations on *auctoritas* and not just the *potestas* of magistrates.¹⁶ But Romans saw no reason to believe that extralegal powers like *auctoritas* were intrinsically at odds with republican liberty, and the fact that only a few years later Augustus Caesar could persuasively argue that his unparalleled *auctoritas* made him both the *princeps* of Rome and the restorer of its republican constitution suggests that many did not in fact take Brutus’s more cautious position on the subject.¹⁷

The peculiarities of Augustan power still fascinate historians, who have struggled to understand how he could dominate Roman political life from outside its formal constitutional structure after relinquishing his magistracies and refusing the potentially inflammatory designation of *rex* in 27 BCE.¹⁸ In the *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli asks similar questions about the unusual influence exercised by the Medici family in the so-called Florentine Republic, portraying Cosimo in particular as a modern day Augustus – the founder of a dynasty that successfully used

¹¹ Galinsky 1996, 12–14. ¹² Adcock 1959, 14.

¹³ Galinsky 1996, 13; Lendon 1997, 61. ¹⁴ Bourdieu 1991.

¹⁵ Wirszubski 1950, 112. ¹⁶ Quoted in Wirszubski 1950, 112.

¹⁷ Wirszubski 1950, 113. ¹⁸ Zanker 1990; Galinsky 1996; Ferrary 2009 [2001].

republican ideas and values to describe and justify what were, in fact, princely powers. Machiavelli notes in the letter dedicatory that Florence's republican institutions operated "under the shelter [*ombra*, also translatable as 'shadow']" of Medici authority for more than seventy years, an allusion to Augustus's role as protector of the *res publica* and guarantor of Rome's public institutions, and the book as a whole reconstructs how the Medici came to occupy this extraordinary rank within Florentine society, paying special attention to their accumulation of various forms of economic and social capital – all while giving the appearance of being uninterested in political power as such. Thus, as we have seen, Giovanni Medici was a man who "never went into the palace unless he was called" and "never asked for honors [and] yet had them all" (FH 4.16); Cosimo Medici was "prince of his fatherland" and celebrated, like Augustus, as *pater patriae* (FH 4.33) despite rarely holding public office and always comporting himself within the bounds of "civil modesty" (FH 7.5); and Lorenzo Medici could rebut the charge of tyranny brought against him by his rivals by pointing out, to the Signoria itself, that he possessed nothing more than the considerable private authority granted to him by the Florentine people on account of his family's outstanding "liberality, humanity, and munificence" (8.10).¹⁹

Machiavelli's analysis of princely rule the *Florentine Histories* complements his more well-known discussion of principalities in the *Prince*. What sets it apart, however, is how it portrays the relationship between conventional virtues and princely power. The *Prince* famously teaches the perils of being consistently virtuous: in a world of bad men, princes must be prepared to use evil means themselves if they want to survive (P 15, 16, 17, 18). By contrast, the *Florentine Histories* explores how at least some princes – namely, the Medici – have successfully used mercy, justice, liberality, and trustworthiness to acquire and maintain their principalities. Machiavelli charges that Cosimo Medici was someone who was "allowed to gather more strength [*forza*] than is reasonable" for any republican citizen to have (D 1.33); but unlike many other princes (like the Sforzas, for example), who relied primarily on the coercive power afforded them by arms, Cosimo's *forza* rested entirely on his outstanding "reputation" among the Florentine people, which he won by always showing himself

¹⁹ The most succinct description of Augustus in these terms is written by Augustus himself in his *Res Gestae*, where he boasts of having no more *potestas* than Rome's public magistrates but surpassing them all in *auctoritas* (2009, 34). But Machiavelli probably relied on some combination of Cassius Dio, Appian, Tacitus, and Suetonius for his understanding of Augustan power.

to be their generous and trustworthy patron. In this regard, Machiavelli suggests a parallel between Cosimo and Julius Caesar, another prince who capitalized on the attractive quality of conventionally virtuous behavior in acquiring “favor” and making the people his “friend.”²⁰ According to Sallust, Caesar’s “extraordinary virtue” (*ingente virtus*) manifested in his “many kind services,” his “lavish generosity,” his “humanity and mercy,” his “readiness to give, to relieve, to pardon,” and so on, all of which earned him the love and admiration of his fellow citizens.²¹ Machiavelli appropriates many of these descriptions in writing about Cosimo’s use of virtuous conduct to acquire social esteem. We are told, for example, that Cosimo was instructed by his father (himself a “charitable” man who “loved everyone, praised the good, and had compassion for the wicked” and died “very rich in treasure but even richer in good reputation and goodwill” as a result of his “excellent qualities”) to follow his example in “benefit[ing] everyone” as much as possible (FH 4.16). By doing so, Cosimo became “the most reputed and renowned citizen” of Florence and one who “surpassed every other man of his times not only in authority and riches but also in liberality and prudence” (FH 7.5). As someone both “liberal and humane,” he “took care to benefit everyone and with his liberality to make many citizens into his partisans” (FH 4.27; see also 7.10). He loaned money to anyone who needed it, including many who did not even ask for his help (FH 7.5, 7.10). He was always “kindly to his friends and merciful to the poor, he made sure his business associates always “shared in his prosperity,” and “all those who depended on his advice and fortune became rich” (FH 7.6). Finally, he was “liberal and magnificent” in his many building projects, using his wealth to construct and adorn dozens of local churches as well as a hospital for poor and sick pilgrims in Jerusalem (FH 7.5).

Unlike many earlier would-be tyrants of Florence, the Medici were careful to ensure their indecent political ambitions were always “covered over with decency” (FH 7.5). This was their most original and brilliant political maneuver, and what Machiavelli sets out to expose in his account of how they rose to power in the late fourteenth century. In a letter to Donato Gionnatti, Machiavelli is alleged to have said that whatever he could not safely write about the Medici in the *Florentine Histories* he would put into the mouths of their opponents.²² And so it is that Cosimo’s

²⁰ As Cicero puts it, “excellence of character excites affection more than anything else, and attracts others to the love of its possessor” (1990, 1.28; see also 14.48).

²¹ Sallust 1963, 53.6 and 54.2–4. ²² Mansfield and Banfield 1988, xiii.

greatest adversary, Niccolò da Uzzano, explains why Florentines could not recognize the evil that was Medici power. Speaking to members of an anti-Medician faction who believed they could force Cosimo into exile and justify this action as having been done for the sake of a “just cause” (i.e. preventing Cosimo from becoming a prince), Uzzano reminds them that “*this justice must be understood and believed by others as by us*” (FH 4.27, emphasis added). But given the complexion of Florence’s moral vocabulary, he continues, no such “understanding” is possible: Florence is a city that “cannot give a hearing to . . . accusations” that mercy, liberality, and love are being used to accumulate princely powers for the very reason they can be so used – because they stand as virtues within the context of Florentine moral and political discourse (FH 4.27). By acquiring his extraordinary power in ways that could only be reasonably described as virtuous in the moral language of Renaissance Florence, Cosimo made it impossible for his elite rivals to impugn his conduct; and worse, he put those who wished to defend republican liberty in the position of seeming to be ‘bad’ men themselves – spiteful and treacherous ingrates – exposing them to the public condemnation and ill-repute that schemers like Cosimo actually deserved.

5.2 *Fides* and the Roman Social Virtues

Cosimo’s liberality would have just impoverished him if Florentines were as ungrateful and opportunistic as Machiavelli famously says that men “generally” are in the *Prince* (P 17). Instead, Florentines understood these gifts as imposing certain moral obligations on them: *obligati* framed by still other moral concepts like gratitude (*gratitudine*), justice (*giustizia*), trustworthiness (*fede*), friendship (*amicizia*) and honor (*onore*).²³ By extending help to those in need, Cosimo positioned himself as a benefactor to whom reciprocation was owed, not legally but morally. And in their willingness to attach moral significance to Cosimo’s behavior, Florentines behaved with the decency that Machiavelli famously ascribes to “the people” – not incidentally, in Chapter 9 of the *Prince* where he explains how “a private citizen becomes prince of his fatherland” through popular favor.²⁴

²³ See especially McLean 2007, 93–136; Kent 2009, 32–34, 62–64.

²⁴ The most important treatment of how the Medici used personal obligations as a source of political power is still Kent 1978. See also Kent 2009 for an extended treatment how these obligations were implied by ideas of friendship and trust.

Many of the concepts the Medici family relied upon to politically mobilize their social and economic advantages have an obvious Christian derivation, and Machiavelli is quick to accuse princes of colluding with prelates in order to moralize the servitude of Italian peoples (D 2.2). But they also have significant roots in Roman ethics and found a comfortable home in even the most secular veins of Renaissance humanism. For example, Seneca's *De beneficiis* and Cicero's *De officiis*, two of the most widely read moral treatises of the medieval period, deal extensively with the moral duties associated with giving and receiving favors (*beneficia*, *officia*, *gratiae*). Both admonish readers to demonstrate gratitude (*gratitudo*) for the generosity and kindness (*liberalitas* and *humanitas*) shown to them by others, with Cicero arguing that no duty is more important than appropriately expressing gratitude and Seneca maintaining that ingratitude is the very worst of crimes.²⁵

Fides was the value that governed these reciprocal exchanges and characterized the bonds of solidarity they enabled.²⁶ Translated variously as loyalty, fidelity, reliability, credibility, steadfastness, trust, and trustworthiness, *fides* was an essential component of the innumerable relationships that knit together Roman society – fathers and sons, masters and servants, patrons and clients, friends, allies, and partners – and an indispensable excellence of character (*virtus*) for any Roman who wanted to be a true man (*vir*). As a virtue of character, *fides* meant “constancy and trustworthiness in what is said and agreed” and Romans demonstrated their *fides* by fully and conscientiously discharging their obligations, whether they were voluntarily assumed (as in the case of promises) or customarily implied (as were those associated with social bonds like clientage).²⁷ This scrupulous attention to duty made possible *fides* in the sense of mutual confidence and trust, making it constitutive of human fellowship (*societas*) and essential to the preservation of cooperative endeavors both large and small.²⁸ Roman writers often grouped *fides* with other social virtues like *honestas* (honorableness), *constantia* (perseverance), *aequitas* (equity), *iustitia* (justice), and *pietas* (devotion), as Cicero does when he identifies *fides* as being the foundation of *iustitia*, which in turn stands as one of the four parts of honorableness that will form the subject matter of *De officiis* (the other three being wisdom, fortitude, and temperance).²⁹

²⁵ Cicero 1991, 1.47–48; Seneca 1932, 1.10.

²⁶ On the concept of *fides* in Roman political thought, see Heinze 1929; Adcock 1959; Hellegouarc'h 1963; Earl 1967; Liebeschuetz 1979; and Freyburger 1986.

²⁷ Cicero 1991, 1.23.

²⁸ Cicero 1991, 1.7; 1990, 5.19–6.20.

²⁹ Cicero 1991, 1.14–15.

Since communities are bound together by the contribution of all to “the common stock” and the “exchange of dutiful services,” justice and trustworthiness are required to preserve social life and “the keeping of faith is fundamental to justice [*fundamentum autem est iustitiae fides*], that is constancy and trust in what is said and agreed.”³⁰ Every citizen, therefore, should therefore strive to “show such qualities as . . . justice, keeping faith, liberality, modesty and restraint [*iustitiam, fidem, liberalitatem, modestiam, temperantiam*]” in their daily lives.³¹

Likewise, Cicero’s *On Friendship* is replete with the language of *fides*. Gaius Laelius explains to his younger companions that a good man has “strength of character [*constantia*]” and he is praised by others for his “honesty [*fides*], integrity [*integritas*], fairness [*aequitas*], and generosity [*liberalitas*].”³² What we seek in a true friend, according to Laelius, is a “reliable and constant and stable” companion, and the “foundation” of all these qualities is “good faith [*bona fides*]: for nothing is stable that is unfaithful [*infidum*].”³³ Signs of “faithfulness [*fidelitatem*]” include being sociable and sympathetic, as well as having a reluctance to “make accusations” regarding others or “believe them when they are put forward.” Friendships are easy to make for those who have proven themselves to treat others with “exceptional good faith, constancy, and fairness [*summa fide constantia iustitiaque*]”³⁴ while those who treat others with “severity [*severitas*]” have a more difficult time making friends.³⁵ Friendship is, of course, impossible for the tyrant because in him one finds “no good faith, no affection, no certain confidence of another’s goodwill [*nulla fides, nulla caritas, nulla stabilis benevolentiae . . . fiducia*].”³⁶

Fides is still considered by many to be emblematic of the Roman character, and certainly Romans liked to portray themselves as having an exceptional regard for this particular virtue.³⁷ It was also one of several concepts that Romans actually deified and worshipped: a temple dedicated to the goddess Fides stood on the Capitoline Hill, hung with Rome’s foreign treaties.³⁸ According to Livy, the temple was originally built by

³⁰ Cicero 1991, 1.7; see also 1.33 and 1.34.

³¹ Cicero 1991, 1.7. Although Cicero also believes those who serve as magistrates bear a special responsibility to act with trustworthiness: “It is, then, particularly the place of a magistrate to bear in mind that he represents the state and that it is his duty to uphold its honor and its dignity, to enforce the law, to dispense to all their constitutional rights, and to remember that all this has been committed to him as a sacred trust [*ea fidei suae commissa meminisse*]” (Cicero 1991, 1.34).

³² Cicero 1990, 5.19.

³³ Cicero 1990, 18.65.

³⁴ Cicero 1990, 8.25.

³⁵ Cicero 1990, 18.66.

³⁶ Cicero 1990, 15.52.

³⁷ Clark 2007, 119–20; Gruen 2011, 115–40.

³⁸ Clark 2007, 59–64.

Numa as part of his founding of the Roman religion.³⁹ Numa also mandated the rituals associated with her veneration:

He instituted an annual ceremony dedicated to *Fides*, with priests whose duty it was to drive a covered wagon drawn by a pair of horses to the place of celebration and there perform their rites with hands covered to the fingers, signifying that *fides* must be religiously preserved and that she dwelt inviolable in a man's right hand.⁴⁰

Images of the goddess Fides and other symbols of fidelity, including clasped hands, could be found on Roman currency.⁴¹

Cicero's discussion of *fides* in *De officiis* emphasizes its special relevance to promise-keeping, signaled at the very beginning of the dialogue by his assertion that "keeping faith [*fides*] is so called because what has been said is actually done [*fiat*]." ⁴² In Book 3, Cicero demonstrates how this definition of *fides* implies the need for honesty in commercial transactions (*bona fides*): "the good man . . . will neither pretend nor dissemble . . . in order to sell or buy at a better price" because in doing so "one thing is pretended and another done." ⁴³ But the final portion of the book and the conclusion of the dialogue as a whole is devoted to showing that promises must always be observed, irrespective of the conditions under which they were made or the consequences of keeping them. ⁴⁴ Even promises made to an enemy must be faithfully observed, he argues, quoting Ennius – "O winged and nurturing *Fides*, and sworn oath in Jupiter's name!" – as a reminder that Romans worshipped *fides* itself as a deity. ⁴⁵ Cicero's key exemplum here is Marcus Atilius Regulus, a Roman naval commander who was captured by Carthaginian forces during the first Punic War and returned to Rome after several years on the condition that he negotiate peace. Instead of defecting back to Rome, an action that Cicero admits would have been beneficial to him, his family, and his country, Regulus urged the Senate to continue fighting and voluntarily returned to Carthage, where he was tortured and killed. For Cicero, the fact that Regulus's promise imposed significant costs on others (including the possibility that Rome would be defeated without his help) would not have been enough to justify damaging his personal integrity. ⁴⁶ Moreover, the fact that he was forced to make this promise is not enough to invalidate it; nor is the fact that it was made to Carthaginians, who were Rome's

³⁹ Livy 1960, 1.20; Clark 2007, 167–71. ⁴⁰ Livy 1960, 1.21.

⁴¹ McDonnell 2006, 143–6.

⁴² Cicero 1991, 1.23.

⁴³ Cicero 1991, 3.60–61.

⁴⁴ Cicero 1991, 3.92–3.113.

⁴⁵ Cicero 1991, 3.29. See also 1.39.

⁴⁶ Cicero 1991, 3.104–105.

greatest enemy and reputed for their own faithlessness.⁴⁷ Cicero defends this uncompromising commitment to *fides* by highlighting its relationship with *pietas*, arguing that since “a sworn oath is a religious affirmation” any person who “violates a sworn oath violates Faith, whom our ancestors wanted to dwell on the Capitol, as ‘neighbor to Jove, the greatest and best.’”⁴⁸

Following Cicero, Livy asserts that Numa’s deification of *fides* had a direct impact on the political culture of Rome, which came to be “governed by its regard for promises and oaths [*fides ac ius iurandum*] rather than by dread of laws and penalties.”⁴⁹ He portrays this culture vividly in his narration of Rome’s early history, arguing that it stood as the basis of Roman greatness for the next several centuries.⁵⁰ When Machiavelli confronts Livy’s argument in the *Discourses*, he does so in order to challenge this claim. As Machiavelli sees it, Roman political ethics was not altogether good for its republican liberty and he revisits several of Livy’s *exempla* of moral virtue in order to illustrate what he takes to be its most serious hazards. What Machiavelli recognizes, and what concerns him most, is how Roman ideas of moral virtue, including *fides*, helped to define and perpetuate the vertical ties that made Rome a distinctively hierarchical society. While Cicero often marginalizes this aspect of the word, Romans strongly associated *fides* with asymmetrical relationships like patron and client, master and slave, and former *domini* and their freedmen.⁵¹ In this context, *fides* meant the trusting bond that obtained between superiors and inferiors, the former providing counsel and protection in exchange for the dutiful service and devotion of those entrusted to their custodial care. Romulus was supposed to have initially ordered Roman society as a trusting partnership of exactly this sort, entrusting the plebeians to the care of patricians and improving on the harshness of Greek precedent by

⁴⁷ Cicero 1991, 3.110; 3.107, 3.111; 3.106.

⁴⁸ Cicero 1991, 3.104. This connection with *pietas* is also manifest in the use of *pistis* (Πιστις) as the Greek equivalent of *fides* in Polybius’s *Histories* (see especially 20.9–10).

⁴⁹ Livy 1960, 1.21. A systematic overview of Livy’s references to *fides* and other Roman virtues can be found in Moore 1989.

⁵⁰ Livy 1960, preface.

⁵¹ See Lowenstein 1973, 188–89; Hölkeskamp 2010, 33–36; and Mouritsen 2011, 61–63. Classicists like Hölkeskamp have found it necessary to explain to contemporary audiences that social inequalities were “indelibly inscribed” in the concept of *fides*, such that it is only very “roughly” translatable as trust, faith, confidence, or reliability because “in modern usage these terms tend to minimize, or even obscure, the hierarchical difference between the individuals involved that the Latin word strongly suggested” (Hölkeskamp 2010, 34). But this connotation would have been obvious to Machiavelli because its Italian cognate, *fede*, had a similar usage.

imbuing their relationship with a familial sense and assigning “friendly” obligations to both parties.⁵² This was the social order that Numa solidified by deifying *fides*, and Machiavelli calls the political value of *fides* into question because he rejects the view that Roman liberty was a product of the consensus (*concordia*) that *fides* enabled and embodied.⁵³

5.3 A Dilemma in Cicero

Cicero’s dialogue *On Friendship* explores a range of questions relating to the appropriate demonstration of *fides* in connection with friends. Having established to his satisfaction that friendship is only possible among good men, Laelius, its main speaker, turns the conversation to whether or not it is possible for the duties of friendship to conflict with the requirements of good citizenship.⁵⁴ Asking his interlocutors, Fannius and Scaevola, to consider “how far love for a friend ought to be taken” and whether or not loyalty owed to a friend is subject to any limits at all, Laelius urges them to consider examples of bad citizens from Rome’s early history.⁵⁵ “Do we think that, if Coriolanus had any friends, they ought to have taken up arms against their country?” he asks. “Should Vecellinus or Maelius have been helped by their friends, when aiming at tyranny?” Moving to more recent examples of political subversion and disloyalty, Laelius acknowledges that “when Tiberius Gracchus was stirring up political turmoil . . . [he was] deserted by Quintus Tubero and his friends of the same age.” But what about Gaius Blossius? Blossius had excused his continued association with the Gracchi by stating that “he had such respect for Tiberius Gracchus [*tanti Tiberium Gracchum fecisset*] that he would consider himself bound to carry out whatever Gracchus wanted.” Laelius is clearly appalled by this statement of unconditional loyalty,

⁵² Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1984–1993, 2.9; see also Cicero 1988, 2.16 and Plutarch 1992, section 13.

⁵³ For a recent treatment of this view in Livy’s work, see Kapust 2011, especially 81–110.

⁵⁴ This conversational turn is consistent with Cicero’s own apparent concern about the health of *fides* in contemporary Roman society. In *On Duties*, for example, he implies that Roman character has degraded over time, musing that Regulus’s fidelity seems “amazing to us now” even though no Roman of his era would have done otherwise (Cicero 1991, 3.31). Elsewhere, he suggests that blame should be directed at individuals like Sulla, who instilled fear and distrust among Romans with his brutal proscriptions (Cicero 1991, 2.7–2.8). In still other places, he seems to believe that Romans remain committed to upholding *fides* but now lack a clear understanding of how to demonstrate it appropriately, particularly in connection with their friends (Cicero 1991, 3.43).

⁵⁵ Cicero 1990, 11.36.

and he explains how upon hearing it he pressed Blossius to qualify his position:

‘Even,’ I said, ‘if he wanted you to set the Capitol on fire?’ ‘He never would have wanted that,’ he answered, ‘but if he had, I would have complied.’ You can see what a pernicious thing to say that was; and, in fact, he put it into practice, or even did more than he said: he did not simply follow the rash designs of Tiberius Gracchus, but was the author of them; he made it clear that he was not just a companion in Gracchus’s madness, but took the lead in it.⁵⁶

Such is loyalty of a true friend, as Blossius understood it.⁵⁷

Laelius insists that a good man would never put friendship before public duty, and a true friend would never urge one to do so. This sounds reasonable enough, but Laelius’s own example shows how thorny these decisions actually are. After all, Blossius explains his willingness to follow Tiberius by citing his “respect” for him: his loyalty was not blind or indifferent to the claims of public duty, but rather motivated by the expectation that someone as reputable as Tiberius would steer him in the right direction. This is precisely how Romans were expected to navigate situations of moral uncertainty, and one important function of trust in Roman society. And Tiberius *was* a respectable Roman, by all the measures that Cicero himself uses to determine how confident one should be in the virtuousness of a particular individual.⁵⁸ Cicero appears to be suggesting that Blossius’s mistake was different and more complicated than just ranking his loyalty to Tiberius over his loyalty to Rome. Blossius’s mistake was believing that Tiberius would be a reliable source of guidance regarding a deeply contested moral and political issue, the redistribution of public land. He trusted that Tiberius would not ask him to commit an injustice on his behalf, and his judgment of Tiberius’s trustworthiness was rooted in his belief in the trustworthiness of *auctoritas*

⁵⁶ Cicero 1990, 11.37.

⁵⁷ H.F. Mueller notes that Laelius actually participated in the trial of Blossius, taking part in the interrogation of Tiberius’s allies and “asking them whether or not they had been ‘friends,’ i.e., *amici*, to Tiberius” (2002, 81). Cicero’s discussion of Blossius contrasts especially with Valerius Maximus’s, which instead associates Blossius with sacrilege by having him declare his willingness to burn the Temple of Jupiter (Valerius Maximus 2004, 4.7.1). According to Mueller, Valerius nevertheless “admired” Blossius “for having held fast to a Roman virtue” even when it was no longer necessary for him to have done so (2002, 82). This is the version of events that Montaigne appears to follow in his *Essays* (cf. Pangle 2002, 66–7).

⁵⁸ Cicero 1990, 7.21. On Tiberius’s illustrious ancestors, influential family connections, and successful military and political career, consult Stockton 1979.

itself. This belief was, in turn, a function of Blossius's confidence in the very deepest customs of Roman political life and it could not be undone without unraveling the essential fabric of Roman identity.

Cicero's presentation of Blossius turns out, then, to be surprisingly compassionate. It is Laelius, not Blossius, who gives the impression of being careless and simpleminded, ignoring as he does the justification that Blossius offers him for not abandoning his friend. By contrast, Cicero portrays Blossius as someone caught on the horns of a genuine dilemma, one in which he is faced with the prospect of destroying the Senate (the institutional manifestation of *autoritas*) either physically or normatively. Cicero offers no solution to this dilemma, and certainly Laelius gives no indication that he is willing to question the trustworthiness of *autoritas* itself. The result is that Laelius can do nothing to prevent Fannius and Scaevola from falling into the same trap as Blossius, as evident in his concluding recommendation: that they model themselves after the most eminent friends of their fathers' generation. After all, how could they know that *these* men, Aemilius Papus and Fabricius Luscinius or Manius Curius and Tiberius Coruncanius, are worthier of emulation than Tiberius and Blossius? According to Laelius, *these* men never "asked their friends to do anything that went against their duty [*fidem*], their oath of office [*ius iurandum*], or against the public interest [*rem publicam*]." ⁵⁹ But what makes him so sure? Why does he think one could not even "suspect" them of doing so? "In connection with such men, it is hardly relevant to say that if they had asked it would not have been granted" for "*they were men of the highest virtue*, and it would be equally wicked either to do such a thing when asked, or to ask another to do it." ⁶⁰ This is virtually a restatement of Blossius's own justification for trusting in the guidance of Tiberius, and it highlights the impasse that Laelius has reached in his own attempt to educate his sons-in-law. This becomes especially clear when Laelius then concludes the discussion by urging his interlocutors to "enact" among themselves a "law concerning friendship" mandating that "we should not ask disgraceful things [of our friends], nor do them if asked." ⁶¹ Fannius and Scaevola agree, assuming the very regard for lawful conduct that such a law is meant to enforce and thereby begging the question of institutional loyalty that motivates this phase of the dialogue. Unsurprisingly, it is exactly here that Machiavelli reopens the question of republican virtue.

⁵⁹ Cicero 1990, 11.39.

⁶⁰ Cicero 1990, 11.39, emphasis added.

⁶¹ Cicero 1990, 11.40.

5.4 Machiavelli's Reassessment of Manlius Torquatus

A key figure to whom Machiavelli turns in his study of Roman virtue in the *Discourses* is Titus Manlius Torquatus, who features prominently in Books 7 and 8 of Livy's history and stands as one of its central examples of "the kind of lives our ancestors lived, of who were the men, and what the means both in politics and war by which Rome's power was first acquired and subsequently expanded."⁶² Livy introduces Manlius in his narration of a great plague in which his father, Lucius, was made dictator for the purpose of undertaking a special religious ceremony meant to placate the gods. Livy explains that Lucius "preferred to believe that he had been chosen to wage war rather than discharge a religious duty" and promptly used the extraordinary authority invested in him to levy troops for an assault on the Hernici instead, a maneuver that incensed the Roman people as yet more evidence of his already well-known arrogance.⁶³ Undeterred, Lucius responded to the popular outcry against this command by fining, beating, and imprisoning anyone who refused to enroll for military service.

Livy points to Lucius's callous treatment of his own son as further evidence of his brutality (*saevitia*) and the action for which he was most despised.⁶⁴ Having decided that Titus was unlikely to join him in a life of political leadership, Lucius sent him to work as a farmhand in the countryside – a harsh and ignominious fate, and entirely unnecessary given the many resources available to even the most untalented Manlii. When the tribune Marcus Pomponius eventually brought charges against Lucius, most Romans celebrated this assertion of *imperium populi Romani* against a man who claimed such power in his own person. But Titus, of all people, regretted the accusation and felt "distressed at being an additional cause of his father's unpopularity and a source of further charges."⁶⁵ What he did next was a surprise to everyone, not least Pomponius. "With the idea of showing gods and men that he would rather help his father than his father's enemies," Livy explains, "he formed a plan,

⁶² Livy 1960, preface. For other possible exemplars of republican virtue, see Wood 1967.

⁶³ Livy 1982, 7.3.

⁶⁴ Livy 1982, 7.4. Livy says that what Romans "loathed" about Lucius "above all" was "his violent temper and his surname, *Imperiosus* ('the Mighty'), which was offensive to a free state and was derived from the *saevitia* he openly paraded and exercised as much against his kindred and members of his own family as against strangers" (Livy 1982, 7.4). On the association between *saevitia* and tyranny in Roman thought, see Dunkle 1971.

⁶⁵ Livy 1982, 7.5.

marked to be sure, by his ignorant and uncouth mind, and no model for civilized behavior, but still laudable for its filial piety [*pietate*].”⁶⁶ Armed with a knife, Titus went to visit the tribune, who warmly greeted the young man on the assumption that he was there to help with the prosecution of Lucius. Once they were alone, Titus unsheathed his knife and threatened to kill Pomponius unless he swore to drop the charges. Terrified, Pomponius agreed and he promptly cancelled the assembly at which Lucius’s trial was supposed to take place. Although the Roman people were sorely disappointed to see a man “so cruel and arrogant [*tam crudeli et superbo*]” escape punishment, they were nevertheless pleased to witness such an extraordinary example of “filial loyalty [*pietate*].”⁶⁷ As a reward for his unwavering devotion, Manlius was elected to a prominent military post soon afterward.

Machiavelli recounts the same event in *Discourses* 1.11. As one might expect, his version is much the same as Livy’s:

Lucius Manlius, father of Titus Manlius, who was later called Torquatus, had been accused by Marcus Pomponius, tribune of the plebs; before the day of judgment came, Titus went to meet Marcus, and, threatening to kill him if he did not swear to drop the accusation against his father, he constrained him to take the oath; and Marcus, having sworn through fear, dropped the accusation.

However, Machiavelli offers a quite different analysis of it, one that brackets any explicit discussion of *Manlius*’s virtue in defending his father in order to foreground the subject of *Pomponius*’s virtue in dropping the accusation. For Machiavelli, what is truly remarkable about this scene is Pomponius’s extraordinary trustworthiness in keeping his promise. After all, “the tribune put aside the hatred he had for the father, the injury the son had done to him, and his own honor to obey the oath he had taken.” While Machiavelli’s conclusion (that “the citizens [of Rome] feared to break an oath much more than the laws”) echoes the language used by Livy to describe the effect of Numa’s religious innovations, his emphasis on the behavior of Pomponius points to Cicero’s discussion of the event in Book 3 of *On Duties*. Like Machiavelli, Cicero understands the exemplarity of the story as turning on the trustworthiness shown by Pomponius, who kept a promise he was forced to make, and for this reason he uses it to exemplify *fides* rather than *pietas*, citing it with Regulus and Postumius as evidence of “the power of a sworn oath” in early Rome.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Livy 1982, 7.5.

⁶⁷ Livy 1982, 7.5.

⁶⁸ Cicero 1991, 3.12 and 3.112.

By taking up Cicero's version of this story, Machiavelli invites us to weigh his views on *fides*. Machiavelli himself does not appear to share his positive estimation of Pomponius: whereas Cicero believes the *fides* of early Romans like Pomponius deserves our admiration and praise, Machiavelli never offers a blanket endorsement of promise-keeping and his placement of this story immediately after several chapters arguing for the indispensability of the tribunate in keeping Rome free suggests a different opinion altogether.⁶⁹ In Machiavelli's view, the tribunate kept Rome free by "crush[ing] instantly and without *rispetto*" anyone who "sin[ned]" against its freedom (D 1.7). Its early history shows that it was created especially for the purpose of securing the Roman people against the domineering and cruel behavior of patricians like Lucius: men whose "insolence" and "pride" (D 1.3) drove them to "pass beyond" the bounds of civility (D 1.3). But having only just sketched this picture of the tribunate's role in protecting Roman liberty, Machiavelli draws our attention to a tribune who allowed his reverence for a sworn oath to interfere with the faithful discharge of his office. Under the influence of Numa's religious innovations, the subject matter of the chapter, Pomponius decided that observing his promise to Titus was more important than carrying out his duties as tribune. Worse still, the Roman people accepted Pomponius's frank explanation for why Lucius was escaping prosecution without any sign of disapproval and they were actually "gratified" by Titus's "violent and extraordinary" defense of his father, despite his blatant disregard for both the public interest and the sacrosanctity of the tribunate (D 3.34).⁷⁰

Machiavelli's portrayal of this episode ultimately suggests an ambivalent view of Numa, the early Roman king responsible for making *fides* a sacred duty. Machiavelli, following Livy, recognizes that Numa's great achievement was giving shape to the existing religiosity of Romans by devising an elaborate repertoire of beliefs, associations, and rituals that would together constitute 'the Roman religion' and using it to reinforce important political dispositions and behaviors. In particular, he enabled obedience to law among a people to whom the law meant nothing (in Livy, because they were outlaws⁷¹; in Machiavelli, because they had a "feral" nature [D 1.16]). Because Numa's religious orders were necessary

⁶⁹ Cicero 1991, 3.31.

⁷⁰ Machiavelli's treatment of Titus's behavior in this chapter has a more obviously sinister cast than D 1.11, for it proposes to teach the worrisome lesson that if you acquire a "good reputation" using the violent and extraordinary modes that Titus employed "you indeed need to work many things contrary to this later if you wish to annul it" (D 3.34).

⁷¹ Livy 1960, 1.8.

for the well-functioning of Rome's political orders, including those established by Romulus himself, Machiavelli says that Numa deserves "first rank" as Rome's most important founder and credit for its subsequent "happiness" (D 1.11). But Numa's religious orders also introduced a new form of social power that undermined the very freedom it made possible. Although most scholars have focused on Machiavelli's later descriptions of how patricians used the interpretation of religious signs to manipulate the plebs into supporting their various "enterprises," Machiavelli highlights an even more insidious possibility right in D 1.11: the creation of social bonds, solidified by *fides*, that ambitious Romans could rely upon as a source of extralegal authority. His observation in this chapter that Romans "feared to break an oath much more than the laws" reveals both the significance of Numa's effort to ground the authority of law in Roman piety and its inevitable danger.

5.5 Popular Judgment and Republican Liberty

Machiavelli's critical view of Pomponius finds explicit support in his discussion of good citizenship in Book 3 and particularly the chapter titled "That Promises Made Through Force Ought Not to Be Observed" (D 3.42) in which he argues exactly that. Machiavelli illustrates the primary lesson of the chapter, "that it is not shameful not to observe the promises that you have been made to promise by force; and when the force is lacking, forced promises that regard the public will always be broken and it is without shame for whoever breaks them" (D 3.42), with yet another of Cicero's exemplars of trustworthiness: Spurius Postumius. In the same portion of *On Duties* in which he praises the *fides* of Regulus and Pomponius, Cicero lauds Postumius for turning himself over to the Samnites in order to release Rome from a settlement that he had negotiated without the Senate's consent, using his example to argue that an honorable man will never "overturn by perjury stipulations and agreements made with an enemy in war."⁷² To Machiavelli, however, the lesson taught by Postumius is exactly the opposite: that virtuous Romans *always* disregarded obligations unfavorable to Rome. Machiavelli takes Postumius's effort to nullify a sworn agreement through his own surrender to be an obvious example of deceit and he unreservedly celebrates it as "a virtuous action." Summing up what he believes Postumius teaches us about republican citizenship, Machiavelli declares that "where one

⁷² Cicero 1991, 3.108.

deliberates entirely on the safety of his fatherland, there ought not to enter any consideration of either just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious; indeed every other concern [*rispetto*] put aside, one ought to follow entirely the policy that saves its life and maintains its liberty” (D 3.41). This advice bears a strong resemblance to the lessons taught in the *Prince*, and unsurprisingly Machiavelli refers his reader there for more on the subject of trustworthiness (P 18).⁷³

To anyone who might be concerned about incurring a bad reputation by reneging on promises, Machiavelli insists that “glory can be acquired in any action whatever” including treachery (D 3.42). According to Machiavelli, Postumius’s example confirms that that anything done in the service of liberty will be praised and honored. But is this really true? Cicero obviously disagrees, maintaining as he does that Postumius was honored for observing his promise to the Samnites irrespective of its consequences. Machiavelli himself admits that Manlius was honored for his “filial piety,” which the Roman people found “gratifying,” not his impact on Roman liberty which appears to have been negative (D 3.34). More seriously, he confesses that Manlius was later “hated” for the severity he used in disciplining his own son despite how “useful” and “praiseworthy” it was in keeping Rome free (D 3.22).

While Machiavelli does insist that peoples are superior to princes in distributing honors (D 1.58), he clearly recognizes that popular judgments about political virtues and vices are sometimes wrong – and nowhere more clearly than in D 3.28, where he discusses how Spurius Maelius, a wealthy Roman, acquired a personal following by distributing free grain during a famine.⁷⁴ From a moral standpoint, Maelius deserved praise for his liberality and kindness, as indeed he was when his plebeian beneficiaries subsequently rewarded him with their “favor” (D 3.28). But from a republican standpoint – the perspective from which Machiavelli himself evaluates the action, as all good citizens should – Maelius’s generosity deserved to be condemned and punished as something “very dangerous” to Rome and indeed “capable of ruining a republic” because it gave him a kind of social power and standing inconsistent with the rule of law (D 3.28).⁷⁵ With this power in hand, Maelius had no reason to fear

⁷³ On Machiavelli’s engagement with Cicero in Chapter 18 of the *Prince*, see Colish 1971; Barlow 1999; Lukes 2001; Zerba 2004.

⁷⁴ Livy 1960, 4.13–16.

⁷⁵ As Livy himself puts it, Spurius’s gift “captivated the plebeians, and wherever he went he drew them with him, conspicuous and important beyond the rank of a private man” (Livy 1960, 4.13).

Rome's ordinary mode of crushing prospective tyrants, the tribunate, because he possessed the trust and loyalty of the people who gave life to it; it was only through the Senate's creation of a dictator that he was forced to return within the "bounds" of Roman liberty (D 3.28).

Machiavelli says the Roman people showed no interest in accusing Maelius of political wrongdoing because they were "blinded by a false species of the good," namely the virtuousness of his liberality as their patron and benefactor (D 3.28; see also 1.53). As a general rule, he says elsewhere, "those citizens who live ambitiously" try to extricate themselves from the rule of law by acquiring "friendships... in ways honest in appearance, either by helping with money or defending them from the powerful," rarely encountering any "hindrance" in this effort to become "of such a quality that private citizens have fear of [them] and... magistrates have *rispetto* for [them]" because such actions appear "virtuous" (D 1.46). Machiavelli's point here is that popular judgment can be rendered an ineffective guard against tyranny when it operates against a moral backdrop that condones politically dangerous behavior, and particularly one that endorses bonds of personal fidelity. Even if Maelius harbored no sinister motives, the meaning of his action in the idiom of Roman social life (i.e., a friendly gesture deserving of reciprocation) made it a "very dangerous" one, which both challenged the authority of the law and neutralized the institution entrusted with defending legal authority.⁷⁶

Machiavelli designates this sense of loyalty, elicited and condoned by prevailing ideas of social virtue, "partisanship" and argues that a republic must control partisanship in order to remain free (D 1.7, 1.16, 3.22).⁷⁷ One solution to partisanship that he considers is subjecting 'friendly' gestures to state regulation, making it illegal to solicit personal loyalty through the exchange of virtuous deeds and services. Accordingly,

⁷⁶ Machiavelli's suspicion that friendships can be used to evade political scrutiny by encouraging a sense of loyalty finds support in Cicero, who maintains that "a friend should not be eager to make accusations, or believe them when they are put forward." Rather, he should "repel accusations brought by any person" against his friend and avoid being "suspicious himself and always thinking that his friend committed some offence." While "sternness and severity" make one dignified, friends ought to treat one another in a more "easy-going and agreeable" fashion (Cicero 1990, 18.65–66; cf. 11.36–37).

⁷⁷ Crucially, Machiavelli uses "partisanship" to talk about the development of tyranny without claiming anything about the motives of a prospective tyrant. As he sees it, the dangerousness of Maelius's action is entirely a function of its intersubjective meaning within the idiom of Roman social life. Whatever Maelius *really* wanted to achieve in distributing grain – full stomachs, emptier storehouses, lower grain prices, political stability, public office – the fact that his moral context identified it as a friendly gesture deserving of reciprocation is enough for Machiavelli to call it "very dangerous" (D 3.28).

Machiavelli counts among the “orders” that “a republic *must* have” those which ensure that “its citizens cannot do evil under the shadow of good, and that they have that reputation that helps and does not hurt freedom” (D 3.28, emphasis added). He specifies a handful of such “orders” in his discussion of Spurius Maelius, taking direct aim at modes of acquiring social esteem that any Roman (or Florentine) would have recognized: namely, “lending [a private individual] money, marrying his daughters for him, defending him from the magistrates, and doing for him similar private favors” (D 3.28).⁷⁸ Again, Machiavelli objects to these modes because they foster relationships of personal loyalty and trust that undermine republican liberty, or as he puts it “they make men partisans to oneself and give spirit to whoever is so favored to be able to corrupt the public and to breach the laws” in the manner demonstrated by Spurius Maelius (D 3.28).⁷⁹

But this solution only defers the problem by generating legal facts that depend on the people for their enforcement. Any law designed to strengthen the rule of law presupposes the very effect it has been designed to bring about; its own application requires the preexistence of legal authority. Numa, of course, dealt with this problem by invoking the authority of the Roman gods, asserting that Egeria had instructed him to establish the various religious institutions and practices that he introduced during his reign. Perhaps Machiavelli thinks religion could be used to anchor a new, more stringent political ethic? But this seems unlikely. Roman political culture, as ordered by Numa, capitalized on natural sentiments that Machiavelli takes to be coextensive with social life of any sort and any viable alternative to it would need to do the same. In other words, you can’t just make a nymph say *anything*. According to Machiavelli, “in the beginning of the world” human beings gathered under someone who “was more robust and of greater heart” and “obeyed him” him in exchange for his protection (D 1.2). “The knowledge of things honest

⁷⁸ Machiavelli’s analysis of Maelius leaves a casual reader with the impression that Rome demonstrates how every republic should guard itself against tyranny, maintaining as it does that “a well-ordered republic” ought to punish “whoever seeks [reputation] through private ways, as one sees Rome did” (D 3.28). But this effort to give credit to Rome rings hollow since Machiavelli adduces no evidence to show how it foreclosed “private ways” of acquiring reputation and anyone familiar with its moral and political culture would know that, if anything, it encouraged citizens to view the performance of these favors as a legitimate source of honor. In the absence of any such “orders,” Rome threw its weight entirely behind retaliatory institutions like the tribunate and the dictatorship.

⁷⁹ This account of princely power and its relationship with conventional morality appears to be quite different from that developed in the *Prince* (see especially Chapters 16–18).

and good, differing from pernicious and bad” arose from this partnership, such that “if one individual hurt his benefactor, hatred and compassion among men came from it” whereas they “honored those who were grateful” (D 1.2). This reflexive approval of gratitude and disapproval of ingratitude is what Machiavelli says gave traction to the earliest political systems, in which benefactors crystallized this ethic of reciprocity into laws and punishments. Although his survey of ancient and modern politics finds there to be substantial variation in the scope, intensity, and circumstances of these reactions, reflecting the choices that particular founders made in “ordering” them, he gives no indication that it is possible for human beings simply to expunge these sentiments.

Ultimately, then, Machiavelli offers a pessimistic view of how fully we can expect to secure conditions favorable to republican liberty. Republican politics, at least as he envisions it, is a fraught enterprise by its very nature, plagued by the incongruity of human nature itself. For the vast majority of human beings, the desire for freedom is the most abiding political impulse (P 9; D 1.4, 1.5, 1.16). But it is also a political impulse made unattainable, at least in part, by its coexistence with sentiments that nourish and validate exactly those relationships in which freedom cannot exist. Machiavelli’s republicanism stands as an attempt to give effective and sustainable expression to the “popular humor” by disciplining those features of the human temperament damaging to liberty. But it does not offer a final solution to the problems it sets out to understand and address.

5.6 Manlius' Severity

Thus, while Machiavelli advises republican citizens to be “machievellian” in defending their liberty, he understands that most of us are reluctant to do so because we are hardwired to regard sociable behaviors positively.⁸⁰ This is one important reason why Machiavelli believes that republics will inevitably decay over time (D 3.1). Still, Machiavelli sees in another of Livy’s *exempla*, Manlius’s later execution of his own son, a model of republican virtue that, even if it is unattainable for most, can rejuvenate liberty when it is possessed even just by a single individual.

Livy introduces the older Manlius in his narration of Rome’s war against the Latins. His discussion of this event is replete with the language of friendship, preparing us to consider how Manlius’s sense of attachment

⁸⁰ Machiavelli’s position on this subject has been confirmed scientifically (Strum, Forster, and Hutchins 1997).

and obligation has changed since his youth.⁸¹ As Livy tells the story, the cities of Rome and Latium were longstanding allies and their cooperation in war had generated strong ties between the Roman and Latin peoples: “soldiers had intermingled with soldiers, centurions with centurions, tribunes with tribunes as equals and colleagues in the same garrisons and often in the same maniples.”⁸² Their shared history meant that Romans and Latins were also connected by “personal ties of hospitality and kinship” and indeed they even resembled one another socially and politically, having “the same . . . language, customs, types of arms, and above all military institutions.” When fighting eventually broke out between them, Livy declares that it looked like “nothing so much as . . . civil war, so little did the Latins differ from the Romans in anything except temperament.”⁸³ In going to war against the Latins, Rome was effectively going to war against another self (*alter idem*) – the formulation used by Cicero, following Aristotle, to describe the truest kind of friend.⁸⁴

These claims of friendship and assistance ought to have weighed heavily on the minds of Romans in contemplating the proposal for equitable treatment put forward by the Latins, who proposed that Rome and Latium be formally incorporated into one city with merged political institutions and magistrates drawn equally from both.⁸⁵ The request was a bold one, but justified in the minds of the Latins given their diligent service to Rome on the battlefield and their regular interaction and companionship in everyday life. “Where strength is shared,” reasoned the Latins, “there should also be a sharing of authority.”⁸⁶ It is here, in his response to this argument for justice and reciprocation, that Manlius debuted his newfound sense of institutional loyalty, repelling what he took to be nothing less than a direct attack on Rome itself with a furious reply. Taking the rostrum, Manlius exclaimed that “if the Conscript fathers were so crazy as to allow a Latin from Setia to impose laws he would gird on his sword, enter the Senate, and kill any Latin he saw in the Senate-house with his own hand.”⁸⁷ In addition to lacking any sense of obligation to the Latins, Manlius evidently felt no obligation to the law of nations (*ius gentium*) either.

Manlius’s institutional loyalty was put to the test a second time during his tenure as a military commander during this war. As the story

⁸¹ On the significance of *fides* in friendship, see Cicero 1990, 5.19, 8.25, 18.65, and 11.39.

⁸² Livy 1982, 8.6. ⁸³ Livy 1982, 8.8.

⁸⁴ Cicero 1990, 21.80; see also Aristotle 2001, 1166a29–32, 1169b5–7, 1170b5–7.

⁸⁵ Livy 1982, 8.5. ⁸⁶ Livy 1982, 8.4. ⁸⁷ Livy 1982, 8.5.

goes, Manlius's son accepted a Latin nobleman's invitation to duel against his father's orders not to engage with enemy forces until instructed to do so.⁸⁸ The son was victorious; nevertheless, his father ordered him to be summarily executed as a punishment for his disobedience. Manlius explains to his anguished troops that his son pursued a false conception of virtue (*specimen virtutis deceptum*) in seeking glory for himself at the expense of military discipline, and that only the harshest punishment could reaffirm the authority of Rome's public institutions in the face of such a grievous "sin" (*peccatum*). By contrast, he declares his own act to be an exemplary one, calling it "a harsh example . . . but a salutary one for the young men of the future."

Livy presumably agrees, retelling the story in order to endorse and perpetuate the virtues on display there. But the broader narrative of Book 8 seems designed to unsettle our confidence in Manlius's exemplarity, offering as it does a long series of anecdotes illustrating the madness and brutality of unrestrained anger: the mysterious death of the Latin envoy who was publically threatened by Manlius, attributed by Livy to "the wrath of Heaven [*iram deum*]"⁸⁹; Manlius's terrible and savage (*atroci imperio*) punishment of his son,⁹⁰ which Livy later classifies as an atrocity⁹¹ and parricide that defiled the consular office⁹²; the savagery (*saviendo*) of Rome's policy toward Latium after the war⁹³; its vivisequulture of a vestal virgin for suspicion of unchastity⁹⁴; the "madness" of a plot by Roman wives to murder their husbands and the enactment of an ancient ritual by which they "regained their self-control"⁹⁵; the debate about whether brutality (*atrocious*) should be used against Privernum⁹⁶; the savagery (*saevienti*) of a raging (*irarum*) crowd mutilating a king's corpse⁹⁷; the confrontation between a moneylender, who subjected a young debtor to his "lust and cruelty [*libidinem crudelitatemque*]," and a crowd "burning with pity . . . and rage"⁹⁸; and finally Papirius's furious jealousy of Fabius, whom he threatens to punish with precisely the same harshness as Manlius had used against his son.⁹⁹

These stories make it impossible to believe that Manlius's virtue is obvious or uncomplicated, and most readers would be hard-pressed to explain precisely how Manlius's severity is distinguishable from the

⁸⁸ Livy 1982, 8.7. ⁸⁹ Livy 1982, 8.6. ⁹⁰ Livy 1982, 8.7. ⁹¹ Livy 1982, 8.8.

⁹² Livy 1982, 8.11. ⁹³ Livy 1982, 8.13–14. ⁹⁴ Livy 1982, 8.15.

⁹⁵ Livy 1982, 8.18. ⁹⁶ Livy 1982, 8.21. ⁹⁷ Livy 1982, 8.24. ⁹⁸ Livy 1982, 8.28.

⁹⁹ Livy 1982, 8.30. On the association of anger (*ira*) with madness in Roman political thought, see Harris 2001.

cruelties that follow.¹⁰⁰ Tellingly, Livy relates how Manlius's own troops rejected his claim to exemplarity by cursing him and providing the young man with the public celebration they believed he deserved, burning his body and spoils on a pyre "with all the honors that can attend any military funeral."¹⁰¹ When the elder Manlius finally returned to Rome after successfully concluding the war, Livy notes that his triumphal procession was attended only by the older men of the city while "the younger men loathed and abominated him then and afterwards throughout his life."¹⁰²

Livy's story emphasizes the multivocality of Manlius's command – the fact that it can be, and has been, interpreted in a variety of ways.¹⁰³ Machiavelli takes a much simpler view of the deed, considering it solely in terms of its political consequences. Asserting that Manlius deliberately used his son as an instrument of war, "kill[ing]" the young man in order "to keep the spirits of the soldiers firm, obedient to their commands, and decided on combat" in the battle that followed, Machiavelli ignores Livy's emphasis on the compensatory and retributive character of the punishment (i.e., the language of restoration that pervades Manlius's speech) and focuses only on its renewal of the "ancient discipline" that made Rome great (D 2.16, 3.1). Manlius effects this renewal of republican virtue among his fellow citizens through his unwavering devotion

¹⁰⁰ In "On Mercy," Seneca defines the vice of cruelty (*crudelitas*) as the harshness of *severitas* applied in a habitual, undisciplined, or indiscriminate way: "cruelty is nothing else than harshness of mind [*atrocitas animi*] in exacting punishment," or more generally "the inclination of the mind toward the side of harshness [*inclinatio adnimi ad asperiora*]" (1928, 2.4). Livy portrays Manlius similarly, as having a powerful sense of the importance of *fides*, but a cloudy understanding of how it is appropriately expressed (perhaps because his temperament naturally inclines *ad asperiora*). In the language that Machiavelli himself uses to describe Manlius's "nature," he is "very reverent to his superiors" but unclear about how to rank his duties to "father" and "fatherland" appropriately (D 3.22).

¹⁰¹ Livy 1982, 8.7.

¹⁰² Livy 1982, 8.12. Livy seems to be implying that the younger Titus Manlius was ensnared by tensions within the Roman concept of virtue and particularly its dual emphasis on aggression and order (Feldherr 1998, 97–98). If anything, Livy expresses admiration for the elder Manlius's willingness to take preemptive action against a kind of lawlessness that Romans associated with kingship when he later has Papirius compare Manlius to Brutus, founder of the Roman Republic, in terms of their shared commitment to prioritizing the public good over ties of familial loyalty (Livy 1982, 8.34). Likewise, Sallust has Cato refer to Manlian severity as a positive exemplum in his debate with Caesar (Sallust 1963, 52.30–31), although Levene (2000) has argued that Sallust does so in order to undermine our confidence in his argument. On Manlius's reputation in Roman political thought as "an example of strictness excessive to the point of cruelty," see Levine 2000, 176–7 and 184–5.

¹⁰³ Miles 1997, 70–3.

to Rome's public institutions, which makes him entirely indifferent to mitigating claims of personal fidelity and therefore capable of enforcing the rule of law without accumulating partisans of his own.

Machiavelli's declared aim in D 3.22 is exploring whether military captains should imitate the "hardness" and "harshness" of Manlius, who "commanded his soldiers with every kind of severity," or the "kindness" of Valerius Corvinus, who used "humane mode[s]" and treated them with a "familiar domesticity." Having initially wavered in his comparative assessment of these virtues, Machiavelli firmly decides in favor of the more antisocial Manlian virtues. Moreover, he advertises Manlius as a being a model for all republican citizens, not just captains, because every citizen must be prepared to enforce the "discipline" that characterizes a free way of life without *rispetto* for personal ties and obligations (D 3.22).

I say that in a citizen who lives under the laws of a republic, I believe the proceeding of Manlius is more praiseworthy and less dangerous, because this mode is wholly in favor of the public and does not in any part have regard to private ambition. For by such a mode, showing oneself always harsh to everyone and loving only the common good, one cannot acquire partisans; for whoever does this does not acquire personal friends for himself, which we call, as was said above, partisans. So a similar mode of proceeding cannot be more useful or more desirable in a republic, since the public utility is not lacking in it and there cannot be any suspicion of private power. (D 3.22)

What makes Manlius's virtue questionable to Livy – the fact that it made him reviled by his fellow Romans – is precisely what Machiavelli prizes as being critical to his virtue. Conversely, it is Valerius (clearly analogous to Julius Caesar and Cosimo Medici) who stands as a model for princes because "being held virtuous give[s] him [the] obedience [of others]; affability, humanity, mercy, and the other parts . . . give him love" and neither this obedience nor this love "conform" to republican liberty, which requires that citizens "live under the laws and obey the magistrates" (D 3.22). Thus Machiavelli concludes that "the proceeding of Valerius is useful in a prince and pernicious in a citizen" because it "prepare[s] the way for tyranny" (D 3.22).

Political Ideas in History

One of Machiavelli's defining beliefs is that political ideas must be addressed from the vantage point of history. Good political theory requires good historiography or it is a wasted enterprise. Why? Because political ideas and actions are intertwined, making it impossible to develop an informed understanding of the one without the other. While Machiavelli knows that it is all too easy to talk about political ideas in isolation from actual political events and processes, he rejects this style of theorizing as both intellectually limiting and politically reckless. Knowledge about the concrete forms of political life to which political ideas are inevitably moored enables meaningful debate regarding the validity of competing definitions, illustrations, and justifications of these ideas. Moreover, knowledge about how political ideas have helped to generate and sustain unequal distributions of political power – their *actual* political import, whatever their philosophical profile – is essential to an informed estimation of their value.

Mindful of this relationship, Machiavelli calls history to his side in combatting republicanism's most formidable adversaries: not those who have openly opposed republican objectives, but those who have played false with republican language and principles. The Medici had pioneered this second strategy, having learned their own lessons from history about the futility of trying to overturn Florence's republican orders using force. Unlike earlier *grandi*, who had openly and often violently opposed measures designed to limit their power, the Medici had insinuated themselves as virtuous community leaders to whom respect, loyalty, and obedience was owed as a matter of common decency. Humanist historiography had abetted this strategy by inscribing the growth of Medici power within an

overall story about the city's formative experiences as a republic, in which the development of certain forms of elite power were figured not as the betrayal of Florence's republican principles but their long-awaited fulfillment. Machiavelli uses his own retelling of Florentine history to combat both of these anti-republican projects. On the one side, the *Histories* exposes Medici "virtue" for what it really was so that future republicans might adopt a keener, more wide-ranging skepticism of *grandi* than had republicans of the past. On the other, it enunciates an inspiring, but also accurate, record of the language of Florentine republicanism and a clearer illustration of the uses to which that language is properly put.

In what way might one history acquire the authority to correct and rewrite another, and thereby all the theoretical implications it brings with it? Machiavelli understands history to be a matter of narrative order and design, as well as material facts. As he makes plain in his withering assessment of humanist historiography, one can include all the facts and still get the story wrong. Humanists had relayed a vision of Florentine history replete with "facts" that Machiavelli does not contest. Still, he rejects their account of the development of Florentine republicanism as politically misguided and even fraudulent, owing to the connective matter knitting and shaping it together. Though we are free to narrate, explain, and justify historical facts, Machiavelli argues, the raw material of history only allows so much stretching before the story breaks down into falsehoods. Narrative ordering and argumentation cannot sacrifice the large, determining political truths that an honest review of the past will invariably reveal. It is these truths that serve as barriers to rank distortion and separate the fictive from the real; true history from a propagandist corruption of it.

According to Machiavelli, the connective matter whereby a history coheres and holds up as a truthful one consists of ideas about human motivation. Ideas about what constitute the predominant political drives circulating within every human society are the ordering elements, more or less visible, of any historical narrative, regardless of the material facts. These ideas, when correct, constitute a genre of "facticity" that can attest to the veracity of a historical narrative, and Machiavelli claims to have written a truer history of Florence on the basis of its organizing claims about human motivation. For Machiavelli, the central fact of Florentine history, and indeed human history more generally, is the ineradicable conflict between the people and the great, who are always and forever pursuing different political aims. The material facts of history are themselves but the signs and symptoms of this conflict, Machiavelli tell us, and thus

history informs and constrains all political narrative by interposing this discordant truth.

Thus, in the *Histories*, Machiavelli dresses Florentine history altogether differently from humanists while using the same factual materials and he asks his readers to judge which is the better fit. Taking the measure of one versus another account is not a precise science, Machiavelli recognizes, because all claims about human drives are immaterial and in that sense unverifiable. Nonetheless, Machiavelli maintains that human history affords us insight through an abundance of evidence, if only we would consult it. On these grounds too, Machiavelli privileges his history over that of his rivals. In offering the better fit, the *Histories* furthers Machiavelli's case for reinserting conflict into the very definition of any political society, not least republics – a broader theoretical argument that finds support in its ability to make sense of the material facts of Florentine history, including evidence that rival historians muffle and marginalize.

To be clear, Machiavelli's point in claiming that histories can be right or wrong, at least in their fundamentals, is not to distinguish between ideological and non-ideological historiography – tales told as if from on high, without the bent of human passion – let alone to recommend his own historiographical work as an example of the latter. Historical writing is always selective, its selectivity always affects its didactic import, and consequently historiography always has a political slant. Machiavelli is open about the political slant of his own *Histories*: it is a work of republican political history, he tells us, a history designed to explicate *and promote* republican politics.

For republicans in particular, there are certain historical truths about which one must be informed, Machiavelli believes, and none more important than the conflictual nature of all political life. While professing to be republicans, humanists had recommended an altogether different vision of political life: one in which conflict is denied outright or presented as something that a society can resolve and move beyond. Machiavelli rejects these claims as politically debilitating lies. According to Machiavelli, no society, republican or otherwise, yields political equilibrium – not in any deep or final sense. At the heart of every polity, he claims, lie two distinguishable groups, the people and the great, and no political arrangement can satisfy both at once. Rather, political orders must find some way of managing each, and can do so only at the expense of the most elementary demands of the other. Republicanism thus constitutes a response to the central problem facing all political communities – how to control the natural antagonism between the people and the great – but it does not

heal this rift, nor should it try, for the unbridgeable divide between these groups constitutes the central and stubborn fact of our political strivings, and will continue to do so however much we might wish it away.

In holding up a republican standard as the measure of his work, Machiavelli claims common ground with humanists but far greater success. Humanists like Bruni had labeled their own histories in precisely the same way, as a form of republican pedagogy. But they had failed to articulate this enduring political truth, preferring instead to enlarge on a theoretical lie: the notion that society is held together by common interests that find expression and fulfillment in political life, especially republics. Nothing about this vision suggests the need to limit elite power, and indeed it readily supplies a rationale for highly unequal political arrangements. This implication was born out in humanist historiography, in which republicanism acquired a perverse and refractory shape and was used to underwrite the gross imbalances of power to which republicanism, properly understood, is fundamentally opposed. Machiavelli judges that Bruni's work was not the republican history it claimed to be, but its very opposite – a reevaluation of its ideological import that history itself authorizes Machiavelli to make.

Political history can thus help us to arbitrate disagreements about the meaning of contested political ideas, and by extension the true ideological complexion of a piece of writing. As historians, humanists had re-written Florentine history in such a way as to inscribe Medici power within an overall story about the city's formative experiences as a republic. The Medici regime, they suggested, should not be viewed as a betrayal of Florence's republican principles, but rather their long-awaited fulfillment. But this was simply not true. As Machiavelli shows, humanists had twisted Florentine republicanism out of recognizable shape, betraying it utterly while nonetheless relying on well documented facts. Humanist historiography registered innumerable errors of detail, emphasis, and context, the bulk accumulation of which led toward rather than away from Medici rule. Machiavelli does not waste time attempting to prove that humanist historiography was a calculated attempt to advance Medici power: he has his suspicions and makes them clear, but ultimately judges the question to be beside the point.¹ What matters fundamentally, Machiavelli

¹ Here and elsewhere, Machiavelli refuses to mire himself in debates about motivation for two reasons: first, because (as he knows better than anyone else) they are impossible to establish with any certainty; and second, because they matter far less than actual consequences. In this case, Machiavelli argues that, intended or not, humanist historiography

insists, is the ideological bent of the work itself, and writing like it. History reveals the true bent of humanist historiography.

Machiavelli's own *Histories* stands as both reproof and counter-example to humanist work, illustrating how good historical writing can debunk such mythologizing on behalf of the powerful. Whereas humanists had argued that republicanism was a political endeavor consistent with the accumulation of power in the hands of certain *grandi* – the city's *ottimati* or 'best men' – Machiavelli uses political history to dispute this redefinition of the term, pointing out that it originally meant something altogether different. As it took shape in the state-building activity of the Florentine *popolo* during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Machiavelli reminds us, republicanism was primarily an effort to check and limit the power of *grandi* through the rule of law. In recovering the history of republicanism as it took shape during this formative period, Machiavelli endeavors to recover and preserve for future generations a clearer sense of how that term is properly used.

Machiavelli's use of political history to arbitrate the meaning of contested political ideas situates him at a distance from the practice of historical contextualism today, and especially the work of Quentin Skinner. Rather than use history to *certify* or *authenticate* theoretical arguments, as Machiavelli does, Skinner looks to history for evidence concerning what, rhetorically, political ideas were meant to *do*. In Skinner's hands, political history serves to illuminate authorial intention and thus a particular dimension of textual meaning, helping us to explicate the ideological "point" of a given political theory.² Recall, for example, Skinner's use of Italian political history to argue that scholastics like Bartolus of Sassoferrato revived a republican concept of liberty in order to legitimate the struggle against imperial power then being fought by cities across Lombardy and Tuscany.³ For Skinner, the study of political history is valuable because it improves our *understanding* of a text, not because it enables us to *critically assess* the arguments it has to offer.⁴

had an ideological bent, one that offered Medici princes additional conceptual and normative resources – and on these grounds alone, he is willing to condemn it as an accessory to Medici crimes.

² See especially Skinner 2000a. ³ See Chapter 2.

⁴ Again, Skinner is primarily concerned what Bartolus was trying to achieve by commenting on Justinian's *Digest*, i.e. the perlocutionary dimension of his work, and the rhetorical strategies that Bartolus employed to that end, but less interested in the status of Bartolus's work as a reflection on the hard-fought political struggles to which it explicitly refers and that justify (in Skinner's mind) affiliating it with the *republican* political tradition.

This difference between Machiavelli and Skinner is traceable to how they conceptualize political ideas. For Skinner, political ideas are best understood as *tools* – tools we use to reshape the political world to our own liking and advantage.⁵ On this view, ideas do not inhere in the material world itself, but only in our rhetorical designs upon it. Skinner traces his position on this subject to Nietzsche and Weber, writing that:

This tradition may perhaps be said to stem from Nietzsche, although I originally encountered it myself in the social philosophy of Weber Like Nietzsche, Weber believed that our concepts not only alter over time, but are incapable of providing us with anything more than a series of changing perspectives on the world in which we live and have our being. Our concepts form part of what we bring to the world in order to make sense of it. The shifting conceptualizations to which this process gives rise constitute the very stuff of ideological debate, so that it makes no more sense to regret than to deny that such conceptual changes continually take place.⁶

The implications of such an approach for how we think about political theory are dramatic and limiting, as Skinner's methodological writings make clear. For Skinner, political theorizing is best understood as a creative project that meets its limits in rhetoric, or what audiences can be persuaded to believe about the political environment in which they live. Political programs themselves cannot be said to have any definite claims or principles behind them, for such justificatory tools are the instruments of intellectuals who deploy them opportunistically on behalf of their own contingent, arbitrary, and self-interested political agendas. Consequently, political theories are impermeable to dispute from the world, except insofar as prior and competing rhetorical figurations of it bound their sway and success. Indeed, Skinner suggests, the usual annals and chronicles of history can only feed theoretical debates more fuel, as such records are themselves relics of a long-standing rhetorical scrimmage among competing but interminable values and meanings.

Accordingly, a contextualist study of political ideas is limited to the study of political arguments as they have worked through language. As Skinner himself reasons, since “[t]here is nothing . . . lying beneath or behind” the ideologically-driven and rhetorically-conditioned “uses to which [ideas] have been put by different agents at different times,” the

⁵ Because he envisions these projects as being necessarily competitive, Skinner characterizes political ideas as a very specific kind of tool: weapons of *war* (Skinner 2001e, 177). Likewise, he refers to the pens used to disseminate political ideas as “swords” (Skinner 2001b, 7).

⁶ Skinner 2001e, 176–7.

history of these ever-changing usages “is the only history of ideas to be written.”⁷ Having limited the history of ideas to the history of usages, however, contextualism is powerless to contradict, amplify, or affirm a particular claim beyond its own local network of meanings. For example, contextualism allows for an explication of Bruni’s self-description as a republican only on the terms of the language in which it is embedded and upon which it is dependent for its life blood. What it cannot do is help us to assess whether or not Bruni’s claim is actually *correct*.⁸

Machiavelli, however, takes a different view of political ideas and what the study of political history can help us accomplish. For Machiavelli, political ideas have a reality outside games of rhetorical invention and reinvention: they also, and more importantly, exist *in* political events, practices, and institutions. Whereas Skinner treats political events and processes as epiphenomenal to political ideation, Machiavelli recognizes that political ideation can unfold through the creation, enactment, and even overthrow of political “modes and orders” and consequently that political history can help us to clarify, amplify, contradict, or affirm the ideological claims that we forever find before us.⁹

In holding that political ideas can be said to possess a kind of facticity that permits us to bring evidence of political history to bear on our estimation of their ‘truth,’ Machiavelli could be mistaken for an adherent of what Skinner has labeled “the cult of fact.”¹⁰ But nothing about Machiavelli’s position implies that he must also believe that the meaning of political ideas is self-evident in political history, that political ideas

⁷ Skinner 2001e, 176.

⁸ Indeed, according to Skinner, looking to politics itself for validation of a theoretical argument is simply proof of having fallen for ideology’s trick, which is to disguise itself as objective fact.

⁹ Najemy has advanced a version of this objection to Skinner in his own study of Florentine republicanism, holding that “the distinction between political and institutional history on the one hand, and the history of political ideas and ideologies on the other, survives only as a tool of historiographical convenience. For it was in the matrix of institutions that the fundamental assumptions of political life, and ultimately of political thought, gathered concrete significance and precise definition in the minds of the Florentines” (1982, 15). Indeed, he argues, “in any historical moment this ‘normative vocabulary’ [of interest to intellectual historians like Skinner] is most clearly visible in the web of institutional arrangements into which politicians and political thinkers alike are born. The language that legitimates and determines political behavior is most likely to be found in the records documenting the evolution of those institutions that gave shape and substance to political assumptions, ideas, and goals. It was, in short, through the medium of institutions that the normative vocabulary was generated and propagated in its most characteristic and influential form” (1982, 15).

¹⁰ Skinner 2001d.

always stand uncontested as features of political history, or that only a single correct history of the instantiation of political ideas exists to be told. The point is simply that at least *some* political ideas – ideas like “republicanism” – have also been political ideologies manifest in political events, institutions, and practices, and for this reason we can refer claims made *about* these political ideas to the evidence of political history. In the case of Florentine republicanism, we can measure the arguments made by humanists about republican political ideals against the proof of republican political practice, especially since humanists themselves have attempted to recruit the facts of political history to their side.

Nor does Machiavelli’s confidence in the historical “reality” of political ideas such as republicanism condemn him to a kaleidoscopic array of historically particular meanings. As Machiavelli makes clear, the fundamental political drives circulating in political society are not subject to historical change. This gives political history, including political ideation, a kind of inner consistency that reveals itself in historical study. When we look to the past for evidence of what republicanism has been, we will find numerous but similar answers; answers that are sufficiently alike, by virtue of their shared origin in certain unchanging facts of human nature, as to permit the development of general claims about what republicanism *is* (and therefore, also, what it is not). In studying political history, Machiavelli argues, we are studying the signs and symptoms of a conflict between two political “humors” that is endemic to all political life and everywhere produces either anarchy, republicanism, or princely rule. Thus, what political history has to say about republicanism in one context will be roughly consistent with what it has to say about republicanism in other contexts: the Roman Republic and the Florentine Republic will reveal themselves to have been similar enterprises, however dissimilar they were in terms of their relative success.

Likewise, Machiavelli holds that political history can help us to appreciate the inevitable, but too often ignored or misunderstood, ideological *import* of political ideas. That is, political history can be used to inform our understanding of how political ideas can be expected to bear on the success or failure of actual republican political projects. Since political ideas help to solidify and stabilize, even sometimes create, actual political regimes, they cannot help but serve political interests. Political history can testify to what the “politics” of a political idea have been – how they have served to generate and sustain unequal distributions of power – and for Machiavelli this is yet another crucial justification for political theorizing by the light of historical inquiry.

Take, for example, Machiavelli's discussion of the "effectual truth" of Christian morality in the *Discourses*. Instead of assessing Christian morality with reference to the dictates of abstract reason or divine revelation, Machiavelli asks us to consider how Christianity has affected the stability and strength of different states. How Christian values operate politically – that is, whether they tend to promote freedom or domination – is a question worth asking too, Machiavelli argues, and as republicans we should care that history testifies to the role that Christian ideals have played in making people indifferent and even submissive to princely power. Machiavelli's analysis of Christianity suggests that history is especially useful in bringing to light how moral and political ideals play out under the non-ideal conditions that obtain in the real world, sometimes revealing them to produce unexpected and even undesirable outcomes. It may be that we can promote Christian values in the abstract, he indicates, but such arguments depend on unrealistic assumptions about human motivation, compliance, or both. A republican political agenda is ill-served by Christian values in a world populated by men who want to dominate others and who are themselves prepared to violate the tenets of Christianity in order to do so.

Machiavelli's study of Florentine political history in the *Histories* speaks in this way to at least three contemporary debates in political theory. One debate concerns the meaning and value of partisanship. Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead have recently defended the value of party spirit, arguing that partisanship has been unfairly disparaged in our political discourse in favor of alternative modes of "anti-partisan dispositions" like bipartisanship, non-partisanship, and independence.¹¹ According to these scholars, partisanship underwrites a recognition of political "others" and a forthright embrace of political difference while also expressing certain democratic virtues and advancing the cause of justice. Yet their conception of partisanship downplays or fails to recognize altogether the historical novelty that it is. As Machiavelli makes clear, it is only recently that "party" has come to mean an organized group of like-minded people dedicated to the advancement of common political aims through democratic participation. In fact, this term has a lengthy and altogether different history: to be a partisan once meant to be part of a group standing behind a particular man, indeed a "big man" like Cosimo Medici. Party membership was to identify oneself as a personal ally of a powerful figure; to be a supporter of some member of the political elite, to

¹¹ Muirhead 2006, 715. See also Muirhead 2014 and Rosenblum 2008.

whom one was bound by intimate ties of personal obligation. Party affiliation was itself nothing less than a form of political subjugation, and one that assisted *grandi* in their incessant efforts to ever further concentrate political power in their own hands.

No wonder, then, that partisanship has a long history of being attacked by writers like Machiavelli. In discounting their complaints, nevermind the political struggles behind them, we risk misunderstanding their object and intentions. Moreover, we risk losing contact with a view of partisanship that is more germane to the bigger and more serious problem of democratic politics today: clientelism. Machiavelli's unease about partisanship is antiquated only in the relatively narrow confines of the West. As other political scientists can attest, his sense of "party" is still relevant almost everywhere else. In denouncing this form of partisanship, the politics of patronage, writers like Machiavelli advocate a political vision much like what Rosenblum and Muirhead support, one in which people – *the* people – organize on behalf of political values, especially liberty.

Another ideal under consideration in contemporary political theory is that of civic friendship. Democratic theorists like Danielle Allen have asserted that citizenship must be conceptualized in terms of friendship for majority rule to be a principle of fairness, and that it must be practiced according to this model if we want all citizens to feel included in the democratic process.¹² Likewise, communitarians like Patrick Deneen have argued that an undercurrent of American thought correctly recognizes that civic friendship forms the "necessary basis for civic trust and true justice."¹³ Feminists like Sibyl Schwarzenbach have insisted that friendship offers us a way of thinking about democratic community that is more inclusive than either fraternity or solidarity.¹⁴ Liberals like Jason Scorzà have maintained that norms of friendship can enhance the quality of liberal citizenship by advancing its instrumental ends while also giving it a non-instrumental dimension.¹⁵ Even John Rawls has held that "role of the criterion of reciprocity as expressed in public reason . . . is to specify the nature of the political relationship in a constitutional democratic regime as one of civic friendship."¹⁶

In advancing these arguments, scholars have before them a rich tradition of theorizing about the elevated nature and value of political friendship. But what political *history* shows us – again and again and again – is

¹² Allen 2004. ¹³ Deneen 2001. ¹⁴ Schwarzenbach 2005.

¹⁵ Scorzà 2004 and 2008. ¹⁶ Rawls 2005, xlix.

the more typical and widespread expression of “degraded” forms of political friendship like clientelism. As a student of Florentine history, Machiavelli knows this story well. As he recounts in the *Histories*, Florence’s republican aspirations were subverted by the Medici family through a vast and ever-expanding network of *amici*. Moreover, his account of this process demonstrates why we cannot dismiss this possibility as unlikely or easily avoidable. Friendships of the sort that Medici patrons cultivated with such expertise and success are often rational choices, made under the imperfect political conditions that political theorists are often too willing to assume away. ‘Friends’ like the Medici provided their associates with valuable benefits – social, economic, and political – many of which were affordable even to the very poor, who had nothing to offer in return but loyalty and esteem. In times of crisis, these benefits are particularly difficult to refuse. Even were they to have fully recognized the dangers present in Cosimo’s willingness to finance the city’s war against Lucca, Machiavelli knows, Florentines would have been hard pressed to decline his assistance given the high political stakes. Likewise, Spurius Maelius was presenting starving Romans with something they needed when he opened his storehouses of grain. Political theory, Machiavelli argues, cannot ignore or dismiss the education that political history can provide in how political ideals have *actually* served to help or hinder republican political projects. The *Histories* is an education in the anti-republican history of friendship that contemporary theorists would do well to consider.

Finally, there is the ideal of political trust. Working against the backdrop of political history, Machiavelli advances a different view of political trust than what has recently been promoted by neo-republicans like Philip Pettit.¹⁷ Pettit has argued that republican citizens must trust one another personally for republican institutions to work properly. The notion that trusting attitudes and behaviors will be rewarded is warranted, Pettit says, because “a self-interested mechanism [is] available to reinforce and reinvigorate the trustworthiness of those in government,” which he calls “trust responsiveness” or the disposition to behave in a trustworthy manner if doing so garners social esteem and honor.¹⁸ According to Pettit, robust norms of personal trust enhance republican liberty by minimizing the need for legal sanctions to stimulate good behavior, especially on the part of government officials and representatives. He describes this

¹⁷ Pettit 2002; Pettit 1997; Pettit 1998; and Brennan and Pettit, 2006.

¹⁸ Pettit 1998, 298–299, 306–307.

argument as “characteristically republican” because it allegedly found expression in seminal republican writings like Machiavelli’s *Discourses*.¹⁹

Even assuming that his empirical claim about trust-responsiveness is correct, however, Pettit’s defense of personal trust is persuasive only given an idea of republican liberty that Machiavelli did not in fact endorse. What should matter to a republican, according to Pettit, is whether or not individuals entrusted with discretionary power use it responsibly. Thus, he judges the appropriateness of trusting attitudes in terms of how they affect *the way that power is exercised* by those who possess it. What should matter to a republican, according to Machiavelli, by contrast, is whether or not power remains confined within the parameters of law, and he worries about personal trust because it is itself a form of power that must be so constrained. But even apart from this conceptual debate, Machiavelli uses history to show that Pettit is simply wrong to assert that republics benefit from high levels of personal trust. Florentine institutions were gutted by the trusting relationships that formed among individual citizens, particularly as they mediated relationships between the more and less powerful. Elites can be trustworthy, Machiavelli agrees – but, as republicans, we should hardly find this reassuring given the anti-republican implications that such trustworthiness has demonstrably had.

In short, Machiavelli’s approach to the study of political ideas is one that refuses to abstract from the messy, inconvenient, and often distasteful realities of political life, especially as these realities have been demonstrated in the course of history.²⁰ The *Florentine Histories* especially reflects Machiavelli’s belief in the instructiveness of history in illuminating the plausibility and viability of political ideas. For Machiavelli, history need not be the final or exclusive determinant of our political ideals; but it cannot be excised from a legitimate portrayal of those ideals as they are likely to manifest in human action and belief. To disregard the possible ramifications of the arguments we make for or against particular ideals does not make their real world effects any less consequential. Political theorizing blinkered to the potential political import of its work is reckless, and sometimes counterproductive with respect to its own stated political

¹⁹ Pettit 1997, 242, 261–270 and Pettit 1998, 295, 242, 302–303.

²⁰ In this sense, it is appropriate to categorize him as a “realist” as this term has recently been used in the political theory literature. For arguments on behalf of realism in political theory, also known as “non-ideal theory,” see Geuss 2008; Shapiro 2009; Williams 2005; Galston 2010; Philp 2010 and 2012; and Runciman 2012. On the importance of undertaking political theory specifically with a view to political history, see Philp 2007 and the essays collected in Floyd and Stears 2011.

agenda. Worse, an unknowing stance amidst the inevitable maelstrom of political life renders us susceptible to the designs of others, unrecognizable as such and without any guarantee of their being in our interest. For Machiavelli, we ignore the “politics” of political ideas at the peril of the people most of all, and the *Histories* is written for them.

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